

**CHUCK
KLOSTERMAN
ON
POP**





Chuck Klosterman on Pop

A Collection of Previously Published Essays



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Every Dog Must Have His Every Day, Every Drunk Must Have His Drink

Several months before nineteen unsmiling people from the Middle East woke up early on a Tuesday in order to commit suicide by flying planes into tall New York office buildings, I sent out a mass e-mail to several acquaintances that focused on the concept of patriotism. At the time, “patriotism” seemed like a quaint, baffling concept; it was almost like asking people to express their feelings on the art of blacksmithing. But sometimes I like to ask people what they think about blacksmithing, too.

So ANYWAY, here was the content of my e-mail: I gave everyone two potential options for a hypothetical blind date and asked them to pick who they’d prefer. The only things they knew about the first candidate was that he or she was attractive and successful. The only things they knew about the second candidate was that he or she was attractive, successful, and “extremely patriotic.” No other details were provided or could be ascertained.

Just about everyone immediately responded by selecting the first individual. They viewed patriotism as a downside. I wasn’t too surprised; in fact, I was mostly just amused by how everyone seemed to think extremely patriotic people weren’t just undateable, but totally fucking insane. One of them wrote that the quality of “patriotism” was on par with “regularly listening to Cat Stevens” and “loves Robin Williams movies.” Comparisons were made to Ted Nugent and Patrick Henry. And one especially snide fellow sent back a mass message to the entire e-mail group, essentially claiming that any woman who loved America didn’t *deserve* to date him, not because he hated his country but because patriotic people weren’t smart.

That last response outraged one of my friends, a thirty-one-year-old lawyer who had been the only individual in the entire group who claimed to prefer the extremely patriotic candidate to the alternative. He sent me one of the most sincerely aggravated epistles I’ve ever received, and I still recall a

segment of his electronic diatribe that was painfully accurate: “You know how historians call people who came of age during World War II ‘the greatest generation’? No one will ever say that about us,” he wrote. “We’ll be ‘the cool generation.’ That’s all we’re good at, and that’s all you and your friends seem to aspire to.”

What’s kind of ironic about this statement is that I think my lawyer friend was trying to make me reevaluate the state of my life, but it mostly just made me think about Billy Joel. Nobody would ever claim that Billy Joel is *cool* in the conventional sense, particularly if they’re the kind of person who actively worries about what coolness is supposed to mean. Billy Joel is also not cool in the kitschy, campy, “he’s so uncool he’s cool” sense, which also happens to be the most tired designation in popular culture. He has no intrinsic coolness, and he has no extrinsic coolness. If cool was a color, it would be black—and Billy Joel would be sort of burnt orange.

Yet Billy Joel is *great*. And he’s not great *because* he’s uncool, nor is he great because he “doesn’t worry about being cool” (because I think he kind of does). No, he’s great in the same way that your dead grandfather is great. Because unlike 99 percent of pop artists, there is absolutely no relationship between Joel’s greatness and Joel’s coolness (or lack thereof), just as there’s no relationship between the “greatness” of serving in World War II and the “coolness” of serving in World War II. What he does as an artist wouldn’t be better if he was significantly cooler, and it’s not worse because he isn’t. And that’s sort of amazing when one considers that he’s supposedly a rock star.

For just about everybody else in the idiom of rock, being cool is pretty much the whole job description. It’s difficult to think of rock artists who are great without being cool, since that’s precisely why we need them to exist. There have been countless bands in rock history—T. Rex, Jane’s Addiction, the White Stripes, et al.—who I will always classify as “great,” even though they’re really just spine-crushingly “cool.” What they *are* is more important than what they *do*. And this is not a criticism of coolness; by and large, the musical component of rock isn’t nearly as important as the iconography and the posturing and the *idea* of what we’re supposed to be experiencing. If given the choice between hearing a great band and seeing a cool band, I’ll take the latter every single time; this is why the Eagles suck. But it’s the constraints of that very relationship that give Billy Joel his subterranean fabulousity, and it’s why he’s unassumingly superior to all his mainstream

seventies peers who got far more credit (James Taylor, Carole King, Bruce Springsteen, etc.). Joel is the only rock star I've ever loved who I *never* wanted to be (not even when he was sleeping with Christie Brinkley). Every one of Joel's important songs—including the happy ones—are ultimately about loneliness. And it's not "clever lonely" (like Morrissey) or "interesting lonely" (like Radiohead); it's "lonely lonely," like the way it feels when you're being hugged by someone and it somehow makes you sadder.

Now, I know what you're thinking: What about that godawful current events song that seemed like a rip-off of R.E.M. (1989's "We Didn't Start the Fire")? What's lonely about that, you ask? Well, my response is simple—I don't count that song. I don't count anything that comes after his *An Innocent Man* album, and I barely count that one. And aesthetically, this is totally acceptable. Unless they die before the age of thirty-three, nobody's entire career matters, and we all unconsciously understand this. If you're trapped in a Beatles-Stones debate, it's not like anybody tries to prove a point by comparing *Help!* to *Steel Wheels*. Black Sabbath is the most underrated band in rock history, and that designation isn't weakened by 1994's *Cross Purposes*. Even guys who make relatively important albums in the twilight of their artistic life—most notably Bob Dylan and Neil Young—are granted unlimited lines of critical credit simply for *not* making albums that are completely terrible. The unspoken (though much-denied) conceit of everybody who loves rock 'n' roll is that nobody old and rickety can be relevant *at all*, so anything remotely close to social consequence is akin to genius; that's why *Love and Theft* was classified as "classic" in 2001, even though it would have been nothing more than "solid" in 1976. So no one is denying that Billy Joel has put out crap for as many years as he put out quality. But it doesn't matter, because he never had the responsibility of staying cool. His crappiest albums (*The Bridge*, *River of Dreams*, etc.) can just be separated out and ignored entirely. Unlike Lou Reed or David Bowie, "Billy Joel" is not a larger pop construct or an expansive pop idea. Billy Joel is just a guy. And that's why—unlike someone like Jeff Buckley—his records wouldn't seem any better if he was dead.

What I'm saying is that there are no conditions for appreciating Billy Joel. I'm not sure loving an album like *Glass Houses* says anything about me (or about anyone). And in theory, this should make it a bad record, or—

at best—a meaningless artifact. It should make liking *Glass Houses* akin to liking mashed potatoes or rainy afternoons. You can't characterize your self-image through its ten songs. I was eight when that record came out in 1980, and I vividly recall both my sister Teresa (who was nineteen) my brother Paul (who was eighteen) playing *Glass Houses* constantly, which was normally unthinkable; Teresa liked the Police and Elton John, and Paul liked Molly Hatchet and Foreigner. The only albums they could play when they were in the same room were Cheap Trick's *At Budokan* and *Glass Houses*. Retrospectively, the unilateral Cheap Trick fixation made perfect sense: Cheap Trick was good at being cool *for everybody*. They rocked just hard enough to be cool to metal kids, they looked just cool enough to be New Wave, and Robin Zander had the kind of hair that semimature teenage girls wanted to play with. Even today, the Cheap Trick logo stands as the coolest-looking font in the history of rock. But none of those qualities can be applied to *Glass Houses*, now or then; in theory, there is no way that record should have mattered to anyone, and certainly not to everyone.

However, even I liked that record, and I was eight. And I didn't like records when I was eight; I mostly liked dinosaurs and math. This was all new. But what's even weirder is that *I could relate* to this album. And I can still relate to it—differently, I suppose, but maybe less differently than I realize. What I heard on *Glass Houses* (and what I still hear) is somebody who's bored and trapped and unimpressed by his own success, all of which are sentiments that have never stopped making sense to me.

It's always difficult to understand what people think they're hearing when they listen to the radio. This was especially true in the 1970s, when there seemed to be no difference between what was supposedly "good music" and what was supposedly "bad music." WMMS, the premiere radio station in Cleveland during the Carter administration, was famous for playing Springsteen's "Born to Run" every Friday afternoon at exactly 5:00 P.M. For years, that was the station's calling card. And this was done without irony; this song was supposed to serve as the anthem and the spirit for working-class Northeast Ohioans. Eventually, that's what "Born to Run" became. But what nobody seemed to notice is that this song has some of the most ridiculous lyrics ever recorded. Half the time, Springsteen writes like someone typing a PG-13 letter for *Penthouse Forum*: The lines "*Just wrap your legs round these velvet rims / And strap your hands across my*

engines” is as funny as anything Tenacious D ever recorded, except Bruce is trying to be deep.

Now, it’s not like this song is necessarily terrible, and it’s certainly better than everything on *Born in the U.S.A.* (except “Glory Days” and maybe “I’m Goin’ Down”). But it’s difficult to understand why “Born to Run” is considered a higher poetic achievement than Meat Loaf’s “Paradise by the Dashboard Light” or Van Halen’s “Runnin’ with the Devil,” two equally popular songs from the same period that expressed roughly similar themes while earning no cred whatsoever. So the real question becomes: Why did this happen? Part of it is probably based in fact; I suppose Springsteen is “more real” (or whatever) and took a legitimately emotive risk with his earnest eighth-grade poetry; referring to your guts as “my engines” may be idiotic, but I have little doubt that Bruce really thinks of his rib cage in those terms. However, Springsteen’s sincerity only mattered if you had a predetermined opinion about what he was trying to accomplish. David Lee Roth might have been sincere, but he was just a cool kid trying to get laid; Meat Loaf might have been sincere, but he was just a fat goofball who was cool in spite of himself. *But Bruce was trying to save you.* He appealed to the kind of desperate intellectual who halfway believed that—when not recording or touring—Springsteen actually went back to New Jersey to work at a car wash. Before he even utters his lyrics, people accept his words as insights into their version of existence. Had Bruce written “Paradise by the Dashboard Light,” people would play it at weddings.

Once again, I want to stress that I have no qualms with how this process works. I’m not interested in trying to convince anyone that they should (or shouldn’t) adore whichever denim-clad icon they choose. However, this abstract relationship between the perception of the artist and the appreciation of his product unfairly ghettoized Billy Joel while he was making the best music of his career (and some of the best music of the late seventies and early eighties). Because Billy is not “cool,” like Elvis Costello—and because he’s not “anticool,” like Randy Newman—Joel was perceived as edgeless light rock. All anybody noticed was the dulcet plinking of his piano. Since his songs were so radio-friendly, it was assumed that he was the FM version of AM. This is what happens when you don’t construct an archetypal persona: If you’re popular and melodic and faceless, you seem meaningless. The same thing happened to Steely Dan, a group who served as the house band for every 1978 West Coast

singles bar despite being more lyrically subversive than the Sex Pistols and the Clash combined. If a musician can't convince people that he's cool, nobody cool is going to care. And in the realm of rock 'n' roll, the cool kids fucking *rule*.

In fact, I sometimes suspect that if I had first heard *Glass Houses* five years later than I did—when I was, say, thirteen—I might have hated it before I even put the needle down. The whole metaphor behind the cover shot (“Look! I’m self-reflexively throwing rocks at my identity!”) might have seemed forced, and the skinny tie he’s wearing on the back cover would have seemed like something from the Knack’s closet, and everybody hated the Knack in 1985 (including, I think, the actual members of the Knack). But because I was too young to understand that rock music was supposed to be cool, I played *Glass Houses* in my basement ad nauseam and—in that weird, second-grade way—I studied its contents. My favorite song was “All for Leyna” at the conclusion of side one, where Billy claimed to be, “*Kidding myself / Wasting my time.*” However, I mostly listened to side two, which included “I Don’t Want to Be Alone Anymore” (where Billy enters a relationship only because his female acquaintance is bored with dating), “Sleeping with the Television On” (where Billy expresses regret for being a “thinking man,” which is already how I viewed myself at the age of eight), and the pseudo-metal “Close to the Borderline”¹ (where Billy suddenly becomes Frank Serpico). Certainly, it’s not as if Billy Joel was the first artist who ever sang about being inexplicably depressed. But he might be the first artist who ever sang about getting yelled at *by his dad* for being depressed, which is less a commentary on his father and more an illustration of how Joel couldn’t deny that he had no valid reason to be unhappy (yet still was). When I eventually learned that Joel tried to kill himself in 1969 by drinking half a bottle of furniture polish (how Goth!), I wasn’t the least bit surprised. Joel’s best work always sounds like unsuccessful suicide attempts.

Glass Houses sold seven million records, mostly on the strength of its singles “You May Be Right” and “It’s Still Rock and Roll to Me.” These songs are okay, I guess, although they never struck me as being particularly reflective of anything too important. They felt (and still feel) a tad melodramatic. They seem like they’re *supposed* to be “hit singles,” which means they sound like they’re supposed to be experienced in public. Because Joel has no clear connotation as a public figure, these songs don’t

gain any significance by being popular. That paradox is even more evident on Joel's 1982 follow-up album *The Nylon Curtain*, an opus with three decent songs that lots of people know by heart—"Allentown," "Pressure," and "Goodnight Saigon"—and six amazingly self-exploratory songs that almost no one except diehard fans are even vaguely familiar with.

Granted, I realize that I'm making a trite, superfan-ish argument: I constantly meet people who love some terrible band (usually the Moody Blues) and proceed to tell me that the reason I fail to understand their greatness is because I only know what I've heard on the radio. Most of the time, these people are completely wrong; while the finest Led Zeppelin songs (for example) are all obscure, the most important Zep songs are "Whole Lotta Love," "Immigrant Song," and "Stairway to Heaven." These are the tracks that define what Zeppelin was about, beyond their tangible iconography as a loud four-piece rock band. *Houses of the Holy* is a great (small *g*) album, but those aforementioned three songs are why Led Zeppelin is Great (big *G*). This is true for most artists. So that being the case, it seems strange to advocate Billy Joel's Greatness (big *G*) by pointing to unheralded songs off *The Nylon Curtain*, an album that only sold one million copies and was widely seen as a commercial disappointment. Logically, I should be talking about 1973's "Piano Man," his bread-and-butter tour de force and the one Joel song that's forever part of the cultural lexicon. But that deconstructive angle wouldn't work in this particular case; to argue for Joel's import on the strength of "Piano Man" would make him no more consequential than Don McLean or Dexy's Midnight Runners. "Piano Man" now belongs to everybody, and most of that everybody couldn't care less about its source. Saying you like "Piano Man" doesn't mean you like Billy Joel; it means you're willing to go to a piano bar if there's nothing else to do.

Meanwhile, saying you like "Immigrant Song" (or even just saying that you don't *hate* "Stairway to Heaven") means you like Led Zeppelin—and to say you "like Led Zeppelin" means you like their highly stylized version of cock-rock cool. It means you accept a certain kind of art. Pretty much everybody agrees that Zeppelin is—at the very least—cool to mainstream audiences, so their timelessness and significance is best defined by their bestknown work. That's how it works with cool artists (Miles Davis, Iggy Pop, whoever). But—as I've stated all along—Billy Joel is not cool.² Even though "Piano Man" is autobiographical, it's not important that he's the guy

who wrote the words and sang the song; I'm sure it would be just as popular if Bernie Taupin had come up with those lyrics and Elton John had released it as the second single off *Madman Across the Water*. Because there's nothing about Joel's personage that's integral to his success, he's one of the only hyper-mainstream pop artists who's brilliant for reasons (and for songs) that almost no one is aware of.

Which brings me back to *The Nylon Curtain*. The reason I generally dismiss the popular songs on this record is because they seem like big ideas that aren't about any specific person, and Joel is better when he does the opposite. "Allentown" has a likable structure, but it's just this big song about why baby boomers supposedly have it rough. "Pressure" is the big keyboardy *Bright Lights, Big City* coke song; "Goodnight Saigon" is the big retrospective Vietnam song that's critical of the war but supportive of the people who fought there, a distinction nobody seemed to put forward until they starting reading Time-Life books in the early 1980s. All of this is fine and painless, and my assumption is that these three songs are the tunes conventional Joel proponents adore. But it's two other songs—"Laura" and "Where's the Orchestra"—that warrant a complete reinvention of how hipsters should look at Joel as a spokesman for the disaffection of success.

Joel wanted *The Nylon Curtain* to be like a mid-period Beatles record, which would be like me wanting this book to be as good as *Catch-22*. But "Laura" and "Where's the Orchestra" really *are* as good as most of what's on *The White Album*. This is because the first song says things so directly that its words shouldn't make sense to anybody else (and yet they do), while the latter is so metaphorically vague that anybody should be able to understand what he's implying (yet I've listened to this song for twenty years and still feel like I'm missing something).

"Laura" is about a relentlessly desperate woman (possibly his ex-wife, possibly someone else, possibly somebody fictional)³ who is slowly killing the narrator by refusing to end a relationship that's clearly over. Making matters worse is the narrator's inability to say "no" to Laura, a woman who continues to sexually control him.

Now, the reason I keep using the term *narrator* (as opposed to *Billy*) is because this amazingly personal song never makes me think of the person who's singing it. Whenever I hear "Laura," I immediately put myself in Joel's position, and he sort of disappears into the ether. It's almost as if Joel's role in the musical experience is just to create a framework that I can

place myself into; some of Raymond Carver's best stories do the same thing. The Laura character has specific—but not exclusionary—traits (her behavior seems unique, but still somewhat universal), and the mood of Joel's piano playing has a quality that jams hopelessness into beauty. This is a song about someone whose life is technically and superficially perfect, but secretly in shambles. It's about having a dark secret, but—once again—not a *cool* secret. This is not a sexy problem (like heroin addiction), or even an interesting one (like the entanglements expressed in Rufus Wainright's "Instant Pleasure" or Sloan's "Underwhelmed"). It's mostly just exhausting, and that's how it feels.

"Where's the Orchestra" reveals the same sentiments, only sadder. The lyrics are one long allusion to watching a theatrical production that isn't satisfying, and virtually anyone can figure out that Joel is actually discussing the inexplicable emptiness of his own life. The words are not subtle. But it paints a worldview that I have never been able to see through, and there has never been a point in my life—be it junior high, college, or ten minutes ago—when this song didn't seem like the single most accurate depiction of my feelings toward the entire world. In fact, sometimes I tell people that they will understand me better if they listen to "Where's the Orchestra?" And you know what? They never do. They never do, and it's because they all inevitably think the song is actually about *them*.

That's what all of *The Nylon Curtain* is really about, I think: the New Depression, which started around the same time this album came out. People have always been depressed, but—during the early eighties—there just seemed to be this overwhelming public consensus that being depressed was the most normal thing anyone could be. In fact, being depressed sort of meant you were smart. And in a larger sense, Joel's music was documenting that idea from the very beginning. A song like "Honesty" (on 1978's *52nd Street*) implies that the only way you can tell whether someone really cares about you is if they tell you you're bad. "So It Goes" (a ballad released in 1990 but actually written in 1983) has Joel conceding that every woman who loves him will eventually decide to leave; "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant," off *The Stranger*, is about how the most perfect relationships are inevitably the most doomed. Joel's music always has an undercurrent railing against the desire for perfection. Another song off *The Stranger*—"Just the Way You Are"—proves that sentiment twice (once cleverly, and once profoundly).

To this day, women are touched by the words of “Just the Way You Are,” a musical love letter that says everything everybody wants to hear: You’re not flawless, but you’re still what I want. It was written about Joel’s wife and manager Elizabeth Weber, and it outlines how he doesn’t want his woman to “try some new fashion” or dye her hair blond or work on being witty. He specifically asks that she “don’t go changing” in the hopes of pleasing him. The short-term analysis is that this is a criticism of perfection, but in the best possible way; it’s like Billy is saying he loves Weber *because* she’s not perfect, and that he could never leave her in times of trouble.

The sad irony, of course, is that Joel divorced Elizabeth three years after “Just the Way You Are” won a Grammy for Song of the Year. Obviously, some would say that cheapens the song and makes it irrelevant. I think the opposite is true. I think the fact that Joel divorced the woman he wrote this song about makes it his single greatest achievement.

When I hear “Just the Way You Are,” it never makes me think about Joel’s broken marriage. It makes me think about all the perfectly scribed love letters and drunken e-mails I have written over the past twelve years, and about all the various women who received them. I think about how I told them they changed the way I thought about the universe, and that they made every other woman on earth unattractive, and that I would love them unconditionally even if we were never together. I hate that those letters still exist. But I don’t hate them because what I said was false; I hate them because what I said was completely true. My convictions could not have been stronger when I wrote those words, and—for whatever reason—they still faded into nothingness. Three times I have been certain that I could never love anyone else, and I was wrong every time. Those old love letters remind me of my emotional failure and my accidental lies, just as “Just the Way You Are” undoubtedly reminds Joel of his.

Perhaps this is why I can’t see Billy Joel as cool. Perhaps it’s because all he makes me see is me.

BUT I STILL THINK “ALL FOR LEYNA” IS AWESOME

When I was writing *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* in the spring of 2002, I would occasionally forward the rough essays to my editor at *The New York Times Magazine*, mostly because I had this fear that they all fucking sucked (and that he would tell me if they did). One of those essays was about Billy Joel. My editor found it slightly bizarre that I liked Billy Joel, since he was living under the impression that I sat in a bomb shelter listening to Warrant and snorting cocaine off a Ouija board. He asked if I wanted to write a profile on Joel for the *Times* magazine, and I said, “Of course.” This has retrospectively confused some⁴ people, as they assume the story I did for the *Times* also appears in *S,D&CP*. This is not true; I think there are only two or three sentences that appear in both versions. But here’s why I mention this: *The reason I was asked to do a story on Billy Joel was because I liked Billy Joel*. And this proved ironic, because now Billy Joel hates me.

When I delivered the story to the *Times* magazine, my biggest fear was that it was boring (and maybe even a tad fawning). Joel just seemed sad and alone, and we talked about how he missed being in a relationship. It seems like we talked about girls and love all afternoon, and the conversation was excellent—there was very little small talk. It was almost all “big talk.” Still, nothing we discussed seemed remotely controversial; Billy just seemed like a rich dude who eventually came to realize that money and success can’t kill loneliness. That isn’t groundbreaking material.

Yet—somehow—this story got more media attention than anything I’ve ever written. It seems like half the people who read it thought it was some kind of a hatchet job, and the other half thought it was a three-thousand-word personal ad for Billy Joel (for months afterward, women across the country would e-mail me pictures of themselves, requesting that I put them in touch with Billy, as if I were his butler or something). In the wake of this piece, there were suddenly all these tabloid reports that Joel fell off the wagon and started drinking again; he also crashed his Mercedes in the Hamptons, which suddenly seemed suspicious. Billy even went to the *New York Post* and claimed that I had (somehow) fucked him over with this story, although he didn’t dispute any of the quotes.

Part of me feels bad about all this, but I honestly have no idea what I could have done differently. I mean, profile writing is a rather rudimentary process: you ask people questions, and then you write about the most interesting things they say. There's really no other way to do it.

THE STRANGER

(SEPTEMBER 2002)

Billy Joel has led the kind of life only a fool would hope for. No realist would ever dream of attaining the level of success he has achieved. He has sold more than 100 million records, which is more than any solo artist except Garth Brooks and Elvis Presley. He has dated supermodels, and he married one of them. Drunk people will sing "Piano Man" for as long as there are karaoke bars, so he shall live forever. This fall he will embark on a stadium tour with Elton John, and they will sell out Madison Square Garden on the strength of songs that are two decades old; next month, Twyla Tharp will take a play to Broadway titled *Movin' Out*, which will interpret twenty-four of Joel's songs through the idiom of modern dance.

And yet as Joel and I drive around the Hamptons in his surprisingly nondescript car, none of these facts hold his attention for long. We talk about his sixteen platinum records, and his memories of making *An Innocent Man*, and his love of Italian motorcycles, and the obsessiveness of his dental habits. But whatever subject we touch on, the conversation inevitably spirals back to the same thing.

Women.

Since he sold his East Hampton mansion to Jerry Seinfeld, Joel has been living in a modest rented house nearby. But he tells me that he is trying to rent an apartment in Manhattan for the sole purpose of meeting women. "I'm not going to meet anyone out here," he says. "The happiest times in my life were when my relationships were going well—when I was in love with someone, and someone was loving me. But in my whole life, I haven't met the person I can sustain a relationship with yet. So I'm discontented about that. I'm angry with myself. I have regrets."

Our conversation continues in this vein for most of the afternoon, and after a while I find myself in the peculiar position of trying to make Billy Joel feel better. I point out that many things in his life have gone amazingly well; I remind him that he's in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. "That's a

cold comfort at the end of the day,” he tells me. “You can’t go home with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. You don’t sleep with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. You don’t get hugged by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and you don’t have children with the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I want what everybody else wants: to love and to be loved, and to have a family. Being in love has always been the most important thing in my life.”

This sentiment is so universal that it’s cliché. But that’s not a criticism. In fact, it’s probably why Joel is able to connect with people in a way that even he doesn’t completely realize: he musically amplifies mainstream depression. He never tried to invent a new way to be sad.

Joel’s sardonic gloom has been at the vortex of almost all his most visceral work. “Honesty” (on *52nd Street*) implies that the only way you can tell that someone really cares about you is if they tell you you’re bad. “All for Leyna” (on *Glass Houses*) is about an emotionally capricious lover who leaves the song’s protagonist shattered and alone. “And So It Goes” (a ballad released in 1990) has Joel insisting that every woman he loves will eventually abandon him. Even “Scenes from an Italian Restaurant” (on *The Stranger*) is about how relationships that seem perfect are always doomed.

“Billy does take things harder than most people,” says Jon Small, a Long Islander who met Joel in 1965, played drums in Joel’s first two bands, and was briefly married to the woman who would become Joel’s first wife. “Emotionally, he takes things harder than I ever did. But all us guys in his inner circle always knew that Billy writes his best when he’s having problems. He works best in drastic situations, and those are always due to his relationships.”

That, of course, is the paradox: Joel’s art is defined by his life, and his best work is his most morose. He can achieve greatness only through despair. But for Joel, at fifty-three, that artistic transference seems to be failing. There was a time when sadness spawned genius; now it just reminds him that he’s alone. “I’m kind of in a dark place,” Joel says. “And I know some people are actually excited about that, because they think I’ll write an album about being sad. But that’s not what my music is about. There have been times when I’ve done that, but I’m not going to do it again.”

Joel hasn’t made a pop album in almost ten years, even though his last one (*River of Dreams* in 1993) moved five million units. There’s always a chance he might someday decide to make another, he says, but he currently has no plans to try; he describes himself as unmotivated, uninspired,

alienated from the concept of commercial songwriting, and uninterested in composing lyrics. He still plays around with what he calls “thematic fragments” of instrumental music, but he has no concrete aspirations for any of it.

“I don’t have a new project,” he says. “I’m not doing anything but personal life stuff.” He talks like a guy who has conquered every goal he dreamed about as a teenager, only to discover that those victories have absolutely nothing to do with satisfaction.

Cold Spring Harbor, his first album, came out in 1971. Joel hated it; a mistake during the production sped up the album’s master tape, making his vocals sound shrill and chip-munkesque. (He recalls smashing the LP against a wall the first time he played it for friends.) His second solo release, *Piano Man* (in 1973), was an artistic advancement and his first defining moment as a musician—and probably the moment that marginalized him forever.

“In the big picture of pop music, I don’t know if what I’ve created is seen as being that important or that necessary, at least not if you ask the experts,” he says. “I was tagged right after *Piano Man*: I was a balladeer, I didn’t write substantive music, my records were overproduced, I played too many ballads. Oh, and of course my favorite: ‘He studied piano.’ I had never realized that one of the prerequisites for being critically acclaimed was not knowing how to play your instrument. That stuff bothered me for a long time.”

Joel’s musical output from 1976 to 1982 (*Turnstiles* through *The Nylon Curtain*) was one of the most successful runs in rock history. But the records he made during that period are consistently maligned by virtually every school of rock scholarship. “*Rolling Stone* magazine would not say anything positive about me, and they were the tastemakers at the time,” Joel explains. “There were people from the old guard who insisted I wasn’t a real rock ’n’ roller. Well, okay, fine—I’m not a real rock ’n’ roller. You got me.”

The reasons for that critical disdain are hard to pin down. There are no lyrics from “The Stranger” as ridiculously melodramatic as the worst lines from “Born to Run” (“Just wrap your legs ’round these velvet rims / And strap your hands across my engines”), nor was Joel’s public posture any less organic or more calculated than that of the Sex Pistols. But guys like Bruce Springsteen and Johnny Rotten have a default credibility that Joel will

never be granted, and it's not just because he took piano lessons. The problem is that Joel never seemed cool, even among the people who like him. He's not cool in the conventional sense (like James Dean) or in the self-destructive sense (like Keith Richards), nor is he cool in the kitschy, campy, "he's so uncool he's cool" way (like Neil Diamond). He has no intrinsic coolness, and he has no extrinsic coolness. If cool were a color, it would be black—and Joel would be kind of a burnt orange. The bottom line is that it's never cool to look like you're trying ... and Joel tries really, really hard.

"He just doesn't get it," Robert Christgau tells me over the telephone. "The person I compare Billy Joel to is Irving Berlin; that's the positive side of what he does. But Billy Joel also has a grandiosity that Irving Berlin never got near. That's what's wrong with him. If he wanted to be a humble tunesmith—a 'piano man,' if you will—he would be a lot better off. But he's not content with that. He wants something grander. And that pretentious side infects not only his bad and mediocre work, but also his best work."

Christgau has covered music for *The Village Voice* since 1969 and is sometimes considered the "dean of rock critics." When I told him that Joel suspects critics will never include him among rock music's pantheon of greats, it took him about fifteen milliseconds to agree.

"Well, he's right," Christgau says. "He's not good enough. He and Don Henley are really notable for how resentful they are about their lack of respect. You don't catch Celine Dion complaining about a lack of critical respect, and she's a lot worse than Billy Joel. But she doesn't care. Billy Joel cares deeply about that respect, and he wants it bad."

Perhaps as a response to three decades of slights, Joel made a classical album in 2001 called *Fantasies and Delusions: Music for Solo Piano*. Influenced by Chopin and credited as the work of "William Joel," *Fantasies and Delusions* sold remarkably well, topping the classical charts for months—though arguably, Joel could smash a piano with a ball-peen hammer for seventy-five minutes and release it as a live album, and it would still sell remarkably well. But that record—and the college lecture tour he undertook to accompany it—didn't reinvent Joel at all. It just convinced the Robert Christgaus of the world that they were right all along.

In 1970, Joel tried to commit suicide by chugging half a bottle of furniture polish. The conventional wisdom has always been that this attempt stemmed from the fact that his career was floundering. (His attempt at a psychedelic heavy-metal band—an ill-fated two-piece called Attila—had just imploded.) In truth, Joel says, it was over problems in his relationship with Elizabeth Weber, the woman who would become his first wife. “I was absolutely devastated,” he recalls. “I couldn’t bring anything to the relationship. That was the driving force behind my suicide attempt.”

Weber is the subject of one of Joel’s most famous songs, “Just the Way You Are.” It’s a love letter that says everything anyone ever wanted to hear: you’re not flawless, but you’re still what I want. He tells Weber not to try “some new fashion” or dye her hair blond or work on being witty. It’s a criticism of perfection, but in the best possible way; it’s like Joel is saying that he loves Weber because she’s not perfect, and that he could never leave her in times of trouble.

The irony, of course, is that Joel and Weber divorced five years after “Just the Way You Are” won a Grammy for Song of the Year. Some would say this contradiction cheapens the song and makes it irrelevant. I’d argue that the opposite is true; the fact that Joel got divorced from the woman he wrote this song about makes it his single greatest achievement. It’s the clearest example of why Joel’s love songs resonate with so many people: he expresses absolute conviction in moments of wholly misguided affection. This is further validated when he admits—just forty minutes after telling me about his suicide attempt—that he was never really in love with Weber at all, even on the night he tried to kill himself. He thought he was in love, but he wasn’t.

“I shouldn’t have gotten married,” he says of his union with Weber. “She said we either had to get married or our relationship was over, so I said, ‘Okay.’ I was twenty-four. I was too young to get married, although it ended up lasting eight years. Was I really in love? I don’t think so. But when I married Christie, I really wanted to get married and I really wanted to have kids.”

“Christie” is Christie Brinkley, the gangly sex kitten Joel married in 1985 and lionized in the hit single “Uptown Girl.” Brinkley agreed to be interviewed for this article, only to change her mind at the last possible moment. She is the mother of Joel’s sixteen-year-old daughter, Alexa, and is generally perceived to be the love of his life—although he insists that his

six-year relationship with Carolyn Beegan in the 1990s and his more recent courtship of Trish Bergin, a TV news anchor, were almost as deep. In fact, tabloid speculation was that Joel's breakup with Bergin was the reason he spent ten days in alcohol rehab this summer, a rumor Joel confirms, saying that Bergin was the reason he "started drinking all that wine."

But as the hours pass and we keep talking, he slowly widens the scope of his melancholy. "The more I think about it, the more I think it was all four of those relationships," he says. "I never really stop thinking about any of them."

So how much wine do you have to drink before you need to check yourself into rehab?

"A lot," says Joel. "A lot." Joel says he was on a "well-documented bender" for three months before checking himself into Silver Hill Hospital in Connecticut in mid-June. This would date the bender's origin to right around the time of his March 15 concert with Elton John at Madison Square Garden, an evening in which Joel was widely described as disoriented, exhausted, and erratic. (Throughout the performance, he shouted out the locations of famous World War Two battle sites like "Midway!" and "Guadalcanal!") In early June, he drove off the road in East Hampton and wrecked his Mercedes; a week later, the *New York Post* was reporting, "BILLY JOEL IN REHAB AFTER GALPAL DUMPS HIM."

"I was amazed by the way all of that played out in the media," he says now. "To me, a musician going to rehab is like a normal person going to get his teeth cleaned. Don't these people ever watch *Behind the Music*? It's a cliché. If I had known that the story was going to be reported in the way that it was, I would have considered not going at all."

Part of what perplexes Joel is that he feels as if he is no longer the kind of celebrity who warrants tabloid coverage; when I argue that the news media are always going to be interested in anyone who has sold twenty-one million copies of his greatest-hits collection, he reminds me that he hasn't made pop music in almost ten years.

"I don't think what has happened to me is that different from what happens to most people," he says. "The only difference is the scale. People seem to think my problems are larger than life, but they're not larger than my life. Yes, I was married to Christie Brinkley, but it didn't work, just like a lot of marriages don't work out. I don't sit around thinking: *Oh, my God! I'm this famous guy who lost his famous wife!*"

It's a contradiction: Billy Joel is keenly aware that he is "Billy Joel," but he doesn't seem to fully understand how that designation is the cause of virtually everything good and bad about his life.

"On the one hand, it probably is easier for me to meet women than it is for most people, because I have a certain degree of fame," he says. "But on the other hand, I have certain problems in relationships that other people don't. I was recently on a date with a woman, and she told me: 'You're one of those guys who comes with all this *stuff*. You're always being written about and photographed and all that star stuff.' And it dawned on me that she was probably right."

Movin' Out, Twyla Tharp's \$8 million show based on Joel's songs, will have its official Broadway debut on October 24. But it has already absorbed some of the baggage that Joel has carried for years. When the unorthodox musical opened in Chicago in late July, theater critics described it as "inane" and "cliché-ridden," prompting major changes to the first act. And though those barbs were mostly directed at Tharp, it's easy to see how they could strike Joel as well, even though he played virtually no role in the production. The characters in *Movin' Out* include Brenda and Eddie (the couple from "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant") and Tony (from the song "Movin' Out"), all of whom have their lives thrown into chaos by the Vietnam War (illustrated by tracks like "Goodnight Saigon"). Tharp describes it as the story of the entire baby boom generation, a demographic for which Joel has often been tagged as an apologist. "He chronicled the time in which I lived," the sixty-one-year-old Tharp says. But there are elements of Joel's work that Tharp considers timeless. "There is a large component of the loner in all of Billy's music," she says. "It's something, for better or worse, that has been part and parcel of the idea of the artist in the twentieth century and nineteenth century. In our culture, the perception of the artist is that of a loner."

Oddly, one of the loneliest songs in Joel's entire lonely oeuvre didn't make it into *Movin' Out*. It's called "Where's the Orchestra?" and it seems particularly apropos, since it uses the theater as a metaphor for loneliness. The lyrics are one long allusion to watching an alienating, dissatisfying play ("I like the scenery / Even though I have absolutely no / Idea at all / What is being said / Despite the dialogue"), and it doesn't take a rock critic to see it as a metaphor for the emptiness Joel himself feels. It's also the Billy Joel

song that I have always related to the most on a personal level; in fact, I sometimes tell people that they would understand me better if they listened to “Where’s the Orchestra?”

I tell this to Joel, thinking it might make him feel better. But I think it makes him feel worse.

“That song still applies to me,” he says in a weirdly stoic tone. “I heard it the other day, and it still moved me, because I feel like that today. I’ve only felt content a few times in my life, and it never lasted. I’m very discontented right now. There are situations in my life that didn’t pan out. I’m like most other human beings. I try and I fail. The whole metaphor of that song is that life is a theatrical play, and it’s all a tragedy, and—even though you can enjoy the comedic, ironic elements of what you’re experiencing—life will always come up and whap you on the head.”

To punctuate this statement, he whaps himself on the side of his skull with an open hand. It’s the kind of thing that should be funny, but somehow it isn’t. Probably because when Billy Joel hits himself, he isn’t smiling.

1. “Close to the Borderline” was also the inadvertent cause of the funniest thing anyone has ever said to me. I was playing *Glass Houses* at college—this was like 1991—and my roommate Mike Schauer walked into our dorm room at the exact moment Joel was singing the lines, “*Another night I fought the good fight / But I’m getting closer to the borderline.*” Mike made a very strange face and said, “Is this Stryper unplugged?”

[2](#). It just now occurred to me that—if Billy Joel were to actually read this—he must hate how every attempt at advocating his genius is prefaced with a reminder of how cool he *isn't*.

3. Actually, it turns out I was completely wrong about this: When I eventually had the opportunity to interview Joel (months after the completion of this essay) I asked him about “Laura,” and he said it was about a family member. He noted, “There’s a complete giveaway line where I sing, ‘How can she hold an umbilical cord so long.’ Now, who the hell could that be about?” Obviously, I can’t argue about the meaning of a song with the person who wrote it. But I still think my interpretation is more interesting than his truth.

4. And by “some,” I mean “six or seven, maybe.”

Toby over Moby

In November of 2000 I reviewed a concert by the Dixie Chicks in downtown Cleveland. A sold-out show. A big deal, sort of. And at the time, I didn't know a goddamn thing about the Dixie Chicks, beyond what information could be gleaned from their name (which—in my defense—is probably more expository than just about any other pop moniker I can think of, except for maybe the Stooges).

I can't recall if I liked this concert, but I suspect I probably enjoyed half of it. I mostly vaguely recall that Nathan from MTV's *The Real World 7: Seattle* was somehow involved with the event's promotion, and I clearly remember getting several angry phone calls from readers who read my review the next morning and thought I was cruel for suggesting that Chicks singer Natalie Maines had an "oddly shaped body, fleshy cheekbones, and weird fashion sense." It turns out Natalie Maines was pregnant. I am nothing if not underinformed.

But ANYWAY, Natalie's uterus is not the issue here. What struck me about this show was the audience, which appeared to be a cross-section of forty-one-year-old gay males outfitted from Old Navy and fifteen-year-old teenage girls with above-average teeth. I had never before seen so many teenage girls at a concert with *real* musicians, which is what the Dixie Chicks are. Obviously, we're all used to seeing thousand of adolescent females at Britney Spears and 'NSYNC concerts, but those shows have nothing to do with music; those are just virgin-filled Pepsi commercials. It's a teenage girl's *job* to like that shit. But the Dixie Chicks aren't part of that marketing scheme; there was one stunning moment in the middle of the evening's festivities where Martie Seidel shredded on her fiddle like she was trying to start a California brushfire, and the foggy arena air tasted exactly like the omnipresent ozone from every pre-grunge, big-hair heavy metal show I attended in the late eighties. I looked around the building and I saw all my old friends from high school, only now they had breasts and were named Phoebe. And that's when I realized that teenage girls are the

new teenage boys, which is why the Dixie Chicks are the new Van Halen, which is why country music is awesome.

Contrary to what you may have heard from Henry Rollins or/and Ian MacKaye and/or anyone else who joined a band after working in an ice cream shop, you can't really learn much about a person based on what kind of music they happen to like. As a personality test, it doesn't work even half the time. However, there is at least *one* thing you *can* learn: The most wretched people in the world are those who tell you they like every kind of music "except country." People who say that are boorish and pretentious at the same time. All it means is that they've managed to figure out the most rudimentary rule of pop sociology; they know that hipsters gauge the coolness of others by their espoused taste in sound, and they know that hipsters hate modern country music. And they hate it because it speaks to normal people in a tangible, rational manner. Hipsters hate it because they hate Midwesterners, and they hate Southerners, and they hate people with real jobs.

Now, obviously, this hipster distaste doesn't apply to *old* country music, because everybody who's cool *loves* that stuff (or at least claims to). Nobody questions the value of George fucking Jones. It's completely acceptable for coolies to adore the idea of haggard nineteen-year-old men riding in cabooses and having their hearts shattered, which is why alternative country is the most popular musical genre of the last twenty-five years that's managed to remain completely unpopular (if you follow my meaning). I once asked Uncle Tupelo founder Jay Farrar about how his audiences changed as alt country became a phenomenon. "What audiences are you talking about?" he asked me back. "Do you mean the two hundred rock critics who actually care?" Farrar was sort of joking when he said that, but he wasn't laughing. And he was probably more right than wrong. Columbia decided to rerelease all of Farrar's early Uncle Tupelo albums on the imprint label Legacy, but it seems like the only people buying them are simply buying them *again*. On the surface, that's a bit sad, because it seems like Uncle Tupelo wrote great songs that deserve to be significant. However, the operative word in that sentence is "seems." What they really wrote were great songs that had no genuine significance whatsoever. I think the person who explained this most clearly was indie rocker/average poet David Berman of the Silver Jews, speaking to the *Nashville Scene* right after he moved to Tennessee. One gets the impression the reporter must

have made reference to the “authenticity” of modern country music when she asked Berman a question:

“One thing that cracks me up in the Nashville local music scene,” Berman said in response, “is this verbal battle between Music Row and alt-country. Alternative country, to me, is just as ridiculously empty in a different way—it’s just that they’re not in power. All these people singing about a life they never knew—it’s really a fetishization of Depression-era country life. If authenticity is the issue, then there’s something more authentic to me about Wal-Mart country, which speaks to the real needs of the people who listen to it, more than talking about grain whiskey stills.”

Granted, the best alt country songs *feel* authentic, and that should be enough (and in the idiom of pop music, it usually is). The problem is that guys like Farrar embrace a reality that’s archaic and undesirable; the only listeners who appreciate what they’re expressing are affluent intellectuals who’ve glamorized the alien concept of poverty. The lyrics on a track like “Screen Door” off *No Depression* have the texture of something old and profound, but they’re not; technically, those lyrics are more modern than everything off Nine Inch Nails’ *Pretty Hate Machine*. And more important, they’re only viewed to be profound by people who’ve never had the experience described in the lyrics.¹ Truly depressed people don’t need depressing music. I don’t think I would have had any interest in hearing lines like, “*Down here, where we’re at / Everybody is equally poor*” when I was sixteen, sitting in my parents’ basement in rural North Dakota, only vaguely aware that I (and everyone I knew) had no fucking money. I probably would have thought Jeff Tweedy was whining. Oddly (or maybe predictably), I love that song today. But that’s because the lyrics no longer apply to the actual condition of my life. I would guess the prototypical Uncle Tupelo fan earns around \$52,000 a year and has two VCRs. I would also guess they don’t shop at Berman’s aforementioned Wal-Mart, which is where mainstream country music sells like Pokémon.

“I definitely don’t feel a part of what I call the straighter country music industry of Nashville,” said critical alt country darling Lucinda Williams in a 2001 *Billboard* interview. “I’m definitely not connected with that world. Nashville is so straight. I guess I’m sort of considered an outlaw here with Steve Earle. They used to write grittier stuff. It’s gotten so puritanical... I don’t want to be identified with the stuff that’s on country radio now. Country music to me is Hank Williams and Loretta Lynn.”

Well, good for you, Lucinda. It's nice to see you've jammed the pretension of Kill Rock Stars into country music. Granted, there is some truth to what Williams says; she's certainly doing what she can to keep her own music "grittier," inasmuch as she likes to make albums about gravel roads. But this quote is really just an example of why Lucinda Williams's music won't matter in twenty years. Oh, she'll be *remembered historically*, because the brainiacs who write pop reference books will always include her name under W. She'll be a nifty signpost for music geeks. But her songs will die like softcover books filled with postmodern poetry, endorsed by Robert Pinsky and empty to everyone else. Lucinda Williams does not matter.

The Dixie Chicks, however, do matter. They matter in the way *big things* matter... which is to say they matter without duplicity, which is to say they matter the way Van Halen did in 1981.² What you have with the Dixie Chicks is real bluegrass music that doesn't sound like traditional roots music, just as Eddie Van Halen played blues-based guitar licks that didn't sound anything like John Lee Hooker. Like Van Halen, the Dixie Chicks added a blond singer to make the band an arena-ready megaforce, and—like Van Halen—the Dixie Chicks kicked a singer out of the band when she seemed like dead weight. The Dixie Chicks' best song is "There's Your Trouble," which is about the pain of seeing your man with the wrong woman, and Maines ain't talkin' 'bout love, because love is rotten to the core. But all those coincidences are really just peripheral. The single-biggest proof that the Dixie Chicks are Van Halen is their audience; they are singing to the same teenage boys, except those boys are now teenage girls.

Here's what I mean: For the past twenty-five years, culture has been obsessed with making males and females more alike, and that's fine. Maybe it's even enlightened. But what I've noticed—at least among young people—is that this convergence has mostly just prompted females to adopt the worst qualities of men. It's like girls are trying to attain equality by becoming equally shallow and selfish. Whenever I see TV shows like Fox's defunct *Ally McBeal* or HBO's *Sex and the City*, I find myself perplexed as to how this is sometimes viewed as an "advancement" for feminism; it seems to imply that it's empowering for women to think like all of the stupidest men I know (myself included). We've all heard the argument that there is an eternal double standard about promiscuity: The cliché is that girls who sleep around are inevitably labeled "sluts" while guys who make

the rounds are dubbed “studs” (in fact, I hear people making *this particular point* far more often than I hear anyone literally calling women “sluts” or men “studs”). What’s interesting about that argument is the way it’s been absorbed by my generation and all the generations that have followed: The consensus is that this double standard is wrong, so—therefore—we should *all* have sex with as many people as possible, regardless of our gender. Somehow, this became logical. And that’s why modern fifteen-year-old girls are like fifteen-year-old boys from 1981: They’re saturated not only with internal sexual intensity, but also with the social belief that they *should* be having sex. And this manifests itself in strange ways. In the 1960s, the Rolling Stones realized that if you could make an audience unconsciously think about fucking, you could control the way they respond to music. Mick and Keith manufactured sexual aggression. Van Halen didn’t have to manufacture that sentiment, because their audience was already an ocean of lust, desperately wanting The Big Loud Show. In 1981, that ocean was adolescent boys. But Sarah Jessica Parker and Calista Flockhart have turned adolescent girls into adolescent boys, and those girls want their own Van Halen. And their version of Van Halen is Martie Seidel playing “Eruption” on a fiddle.

This is one example of why Wal-Mart country will never become unpopular, even though nobody I know seems to openly embrace it: It’s flexible, and it’s reflexive. It’s flexible because nobody in the media (outside of Tennessee) seems to care how it operates, so it can quietly make adjustments and corrections to fit its zeitgeist; country music evolves a little like the stock market. It’s reflexive because it doesn’t place an artistic premium on creating new ideas; nobody expects Clint Black to be the *first* guy to come up with *anything*. Nobody even expects him to write his own songs. As a consequence, the organic themes in Wal-Mart country filter *up* from its audience. They actually come from the people shopping in Wal-Mart. And when those Wal-Mart shoppers eventually hear their own ideas on the radio, it somehow seems fresh. While rock and hip-hop constantly try to break through to a future consciousness—and while alt country tries to replicate a lost consciousness from the 1930s—modern country artists validate the experience of living right here, right now.

This started to become clear as glass in the early 1990s. At the time, the presumption in the media was that grungy Sasquatch rockers were emerging as a more “realistic” reflection of public sentiment, apparently because the

musicians dressed like laid-off factory employees and down-tuned their guitars. This was not without justification; I will concede that this posit seemed completely sensible at the time. But—with the exception of the second Nirvana album, the first three Pearl Jam records, and maybe four or five Soundgarden songs—that music has not sustained a significant life outside its brief window of import. Most of that music already comes across as dated as disco. But what *has* continued to matter are crappy country songs like Trisha Yearwood’s 1991 single “She’s in Love with the Boy,” which probably means it isn’t entirely crappy.

“She’s in Love with the Boy” is almost like something the Ronettes could have done: A sweet girl named Katie is dating a local bonehead named Tommy, and everyone in town—particularly Katie’s father—thinks she can do better. However, their love is ultimately vindicated by Katie’s mother, who explains that she was once dating a local bonehead whom everyone hated, and that man became Katie’s father. Certainly, this is not an innovative narrative (in fact, I think it was actually an episode from the 1991 season of *The Wonder Years*, costarring David Schwimmer as “the bonehead”). However, there are two elements to this song that make it amazingly evocative to a certain kind of listener. The irony is that they’re the same elements that make intellectuals despise modern country music.

The first is that the lyrics to this song are highly specific, but secretly universal. I’m referring particularly to lines like “*But later on, outside the Tastee Freeze / Tommy slips something on her hand / He says, “My high school ring will have to do / Till I can buy a wedding band.”*” Proposing marriage at a Tastee Freeze is not exactly romantic, but it *is* important, just as it was when scruffy little Johnny Cougar mentioned eating chili dogs “outside the Tastee Freeze” in the song “Jack and Diane.” Tastee Freezes are iconic structures in the rural Midwest, because they say something about your hometown; they irrefutably prove your community does not have enough of a population to sustain a Dairy Queen. In fact, you don’t even have enough of a population to sustain an ice cream facility *with indoor seating* (you might notice that both Yearwood and Cougar describe encounters that take place *outside* the Tastee Freeze, presumably in the parking lot). Tastee Freezes are the places that remind you how isolated you are; a Tastee Freeze is like an oasis. And even though they’re everywhere, you don’t realize that until you move away. It’s a circular reality: Tastee Freezes exist where people are disconnected from the rest of the world—

and that very disconnection makes them all seem autonomous. So when Yearwood mentions this kind of coquettish proposal between two overtly archetypical teenagers, it cuts an amazingly wide swath. It's what David Berman means when he says that Wal-Mart country reflects the lives of its audience. There are thousands of people in this country who still can't believe Trish Yearwood perfectly described the teenage experience of someone they know in real life. And the amazing thing is that they're all correct.

However, there's another reason why a song like "She's in Love with the Boy" is so successful, and it's even less complicated. "She's in Love with the Boy" is easy to understand—and I don't mean intellectually. I mean *literally*. A huge part of why somebody like Yearwood connects so deeply with so many people (she has career sales approaching 11 million) is because her words can be easily heard and immediately contextualized, even when a person casually hears them one time. I'm sure that sounds like a moronically obvious argument for what makes a piece of music good, but I've come to realize it's one of those painfully obvious things that everyone who's allegedly enlightened seems to deny.

Whenever you talk to collegiate musicologists about music, they will often complain that rock writers place entirely too much emphasis on the content of song lyrics. Academics tend to argue that lyrics have only nominal importance; they will say that pop critics tend to see pop songs as having two parts—words and music—and that this is an example of ignorance. They think the words to a song like the Beatles' "Helter Skelter" are only a fraction of the total creation; the lyrics have no more individual importance than the guitar chords, or Ringo's drum fills, or George Martin's production, or any other component. Moreover, they'll tell you that song lyrics are not really poetry, because they only matter when they're married to a specific piece of music and are often used as filler; lyrics usually say very little about the songwriter and are more important for how practical they are (i.e., "Can I match a melody to this?") than for how deep they are (i.e., "What does this mean?"). What's funny is that rock writers sort of validate those suggestions, but only because they take the appreciation of lyrical content too far. They're exclusively focused on how *clever* lyrics are, even if that cleverness is only appreciated by their peers (for example, rock critics love David Berman's buddy Stephen Malkmus, and he is indeed very

talented—although I sometimes wonder how funny jokes about Geddy Lee’s voice are to people who have never listened to a Rush album).³

The net result of all this is that discernible lyrics are—by and large—dismissed. The elitist belief is that hearing what an artist is saying is either (a) totally irrelevant, or (b) only relevant when difficult. And what these elitists forget is that normal people never think like that. Normal people want to hear what artists are saying, and normal people tend to perceive the vox as the sole identity of the artistic product. This is completely clear to anyone who steps back and just looks at what material works outside of New York and L.A. I find it amusing that so many pundits have tried to create explanations for why Eminem is so polarizing (people say that it’s just because he’s white, or that it’s all because of Dr. Dre, or that it’s just because he’s controversial, etc.). To me, the biggest reason is obvious: He enunciates better than any rapper who ever lived. *He’s literally good at talking*. The first time you hear an Eminem song, you can decide whether or not you find him entertaining. That seems to be a central quality for anyone who deeply resonates with blue-collar Americans. I once did a feature for *SPIN* magazine that tried to explain why Morrissey has become a cult figure with Latino teenagers in California, and I suggested a variety of explanations for why a forgotten, asexual Oscar Wilde fanatic would resonate with Hispanic kids in East L.A. What I came to realize is that relating to Morrissey is easy for anyone who puts forth the effort to try; Moz sings about universal problems (loneliness, alienation, emotional fraud), and he sings about those problems in a way that’s oddly literal. His voice is clear, the meanings can be appreciated on two (and sometimes three) different levels, and you can always hear every thought. He lets you get close to him. I’m more surprised that Latinos are the *only* kids who still love him.

What I’m saying is that lyrics do matter, and people who say they’re overemphasized by critics are wrong. The significance of lyrics in pop music is not overrated; in fact, it’s probably underrated. And this is what people overlook about modern country music. They fail to see that it’s a word-based idiom, and words are far more effective than pianos or guitars. The manipulation of sonics makes someone like Moby a genius, but he’ll never have the middle-class importance of someone like Toby Keith.

Now, I know what you’re thinking: You’re thinking that this is a profoundly depressing argument, because it implies that the only things that

can be culturally important are things that appeal to the lowest common denominator. But that's not what I'm suggesting. I realize that Toby Keith seems like a troglodyte, especially when he appears in those long-distance commercials with Terry Bradshaw and ALF—but it's not his simplicity that makes him vital. It's his clarity. Keith writes songs like 1993's "Should've Been a Cowboy," and what's compelling is that you can't deconstruct its message. "Should've Been a Cowboy" is not like Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive," where Jon Bon Jovi claimed to live *like* a cowboy; Toby Keith wants to be a cowboy *for real*. "I should have been a cowboy," he sings. "I should have learned to rope and ride." Somewhat amusingly, the cowboys Toby references in his songs are all fake cowboys (*Guns* Smoke's Marshal Dillon, cinematic crooners Gene Autry and Roy Rogers), but fake cowboys are the only kind that Keith—and most of America—ever wanted to embody. When I was fourteen, I liked Bon Jovi, and part of the reason why was because I liked the idea of riding a steel horse and using whiskey bottles as wall calendars. I aspired to turn my life into that of a modern-day cowboy,⁴ and that always seemed vaguely possible. But whenever I go back to my hometown and see the people I grew up with—many of whom are still living the same life we all had twelve years ago as high school seniors—I realize that I was very much the exception. Lots of people (in fact, most people) do not dream about morphing their current life into something dramatic and cool and metaphoric. Most people see their life as a job that they have to finish; if anything, they want their life to be *less* complicated than it already is. They want their life to only have one meaning. So when they imagine a better existence, it's either completely imaginary (i.e., Toby's nineteenth-century Lone Ranger fantasy) or staunchly practical (i.e., Yearwood's description of the girl who just wants to get married without catching static from her old man). The reason Garth Brooks and Shania Twain have sold roughly 120 million more albums than Bob Dylan and Liz Phair is not because record buyers are all a bunch of blithering idiots; it's because Garth and Shania are simply better at expressing the human condition. They're less talented, but they understand more people.

The paradox, of course, is that I'm writing this essay while staring at my CD rack, which currently holds seventeen Dylan and Phair records and exactly three country records released after 1974. And in a weird way, that makes me happy. I have at least one thing in common with Bob Dylan:

Neither one of us understands how the world works. When push comes to shove, we're both Reba's bitch.

1. This is similar to the way rich white kids in places like suburban Connecticut fell in love with N.W.A. records in the early nineties.

[2.](#) Although it should be noted that David Lee Roth seemed to have no problem with Ronald Reagan hailing from California.

[3](#). And don't even get me *started* on the line "You're my fact-checking cuz"!

4. Like Tesla!

I, Rock Chump

I used to think there was nothing worse than being trapped in a conversation with someone who knows absolutely nothing about anything. However, an acquaintance taught me this wasn't true. "There's one thing worse than talking to a person who knows about nothing," he said, "and that's talking to someone who knows about nothing *except* music."

You know the kind of person to which my friend refers. You've met him at underattended rock concerts and in empty downtown taverns, and he inevitably adores the Moody Blues. But try to imagine if one of those people was so adroit at being singularly obsessive that he actually got paid for it. Imagine if the weirdo who seems to live in your nearest locally owned record store suddenly had a 152 IQ and a degree from Tufts. And now imagine a hundred of those people coming together for four rainy days in Seattle, all of them totally fucking stoked for the opportunity to compare *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* with Danish physicist Niels Bohr's field theory on radioactive decay.

Prepare to rock and/or roll.

What I have just described was a glimpse of life inside the palatial walls of the Experience Music Project, home for the first annual Pop Music Studies Conference (a summit boldly titled "Crafting Sounds, Creating Meaning: Making Popular Music in the U.S.") Held in April 2002, the conference brought together a wide array of respected academics and snarky rock critics who were asked to "think about pop music in the abstract." What this really meant is that one hundred people who like Sigur Rós way too much came together to read self-penned manuscripts that were either too goofy to be classified as scholarship or too pedantic to be seen as commercially viable.

I was one of these people.

Now, let me be completely clear about something: I had a wonderful time at EMP. I'm precisely the kind of supergeek who enjoys forty-minute conversations about side three of Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music* album. The pencil-necked eggheads at "Crafting Sounds, Creating Meaning" are—

sadly—my people. If I was Jewish, EMP would have been my Israel. Yet even I cannot deny that this conference was probably the *least* rock 'n' roll experience I've ever had.

Thursday, April 11, 5:20 P.M.: I have just arrived outside the EMP building, a monstrosity of postmodern architecture nestled in the shadow of the Space Needle. Frankly, EMP looks ridiculous from the outside (it's bulbous, multicolored, and possibly made out of aluminum). However, the inside is gorgeous. I can't believe how clean these bathrooms are, particularly the porcelain urinals. This being a "rock conference," I wonder if we will later snort cocaine off these fixtures.

It takes me about ten minutes to realize this is not going to happen; most of the people at this conference barely even drink. We're all mingling upstairs in the EMP bar (I think it's referred to as the "Liquid Lounge"), and I'm introduced to Douglas Wolk, a writer for the *Village Voice* and *SPIN* and the bass player for a metacommunicative band called The Media. I can immediately tell that Wolk is interesting, but we're both struggling with casual conversation, so I offer to buy him a drink. He wants an orange juice. This is fine (I have nothing *against* orange juice, per se), but it quickly dawns on me that this sensibility will pretty much be the norm for the weekend. At least in the conventional, stereotypical, Nikki Sixxian definition of the term *debauchery*, EMP is a "no rocking" zone.

I wander about the mixer, trying to mix. A few people are discussing how the Avalanches are overhyped, an odd argument to make about a band that 98 percent of America has never even heard of. There is lots of handshaking, and everyone seems to be saying "I love your work" or "I love your book" to whomever they happen to be standing alongside. Some people are upset that EMP has only provided free cookies for the mixer (there had been a rumor about chicken wings), but the cookies are crisp. A graduate student from Bowling Green University and I talk about the Wu-Tang Clan's obsession with kung-fu movies; when I tell this guy he looks like the lead singer of Nickelback, he threatens to punch me.

There aren't many women at this conference. I see one tall female with pigtails who looks mildly attractive, so I saunter up and try to make conversation. It turns out she's a twenty-four-year-old freelance writer from San Francisco, and she's not even actively involved with the conference; she just wanted to hang out with rock journalists (!) and meet Simon

Reynolds, the British author of a drug-friendly rave book called *Generation Ecstasy*. I try to talk shop with this woman, but her shop appears to exist in Narnia; she tells me her ultimate goal is to publish a fictional biography about Alex Chilton built on the premise that Chilton was actually sired by a sexual tryst between a woman and an alligator. “The research is totally kicking my ass right now,” she tells me. “Basically, I need to learn more about alligators. And about the Delta blues.”

Tonight, Solomon Burke is speaking in a room the EMP staff refers to as their “sky church,” but I elect to go to some dive bar four blocks away from the museum. I meet an amazing blond girl from a local Seattle alternative paper, and we do not drink orange juice; we end up having somewhere between eight and four thousand cocktails, and we play Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Tuesday’s Gone” on the jukebox in order to slow dance without leaving the comfort of our booth. I go to bed around 3:30 A.M., confident that I have rocked more than enough for my juice-drinking brethren.

Friday, April 12, 9:40 A.M.: I just woke up. The conference apparently started at 8:30 A.M. What kind of self-respecting rocker gets up for *anything* at 8:30? Doesn’t anyone here own *Appetite for Destruction*? Do these people not realize that even if you wake up around seven, you’re not supposed to get out of bed until nine? I wander down to the lobby of the Courtyard Marriott at 10:05, assuming there will be several other panelists feeling exactly like me, which is to say “below average.” But there’s only one guy, and he’s reading the newspaper. It appears that everyone else made it to the 8:30 A.M. welcoming remarks. There’s an upside to being juice drinkers, I guess.

The first three-person panel I sit through is titled “Self-Image.” The initial presenter is *New York Times* writer Kelefa Sanneh, and his paper is sort of funny. Of course, what’s even funnier is watching the audience when he plays snippets of N.W.A. to illustrate his points; suddenly, the room is filled with old white people bobbing their heads along with Ice Cube, desperately trying to show everyone just how much they love hip-hop. That’s one of the unspoken prerequisites at this conference: You must overtly love whatever music seems the most detached from your own personal experience. Apparently, this proves you’re a genius. As a consequence, all the white people talk about how much they love rap, all the young females insist they love misogynistic cock rock, and all the aging

academics praise Pink and the Backstreet Boys. Other sentiments that are essential to publicly express at a rock conference are as follows: All unpopular music should be more popular; all popular music should be less popular (unless it's aggressively vapid, which thereby makes it transcendent); authenticity is essential; authenticity is ridiculous; music is the soundscape through which we experience reality; there will never be another *Trout Mask Replica*. It's also essential to have a "mentor," or at least to claim that you do. Former *SPIN* writer and current EMP program manager Eric Weisbard tells me he's an "unapologetic Robert Christgau protégé." I meet at least two people who openly describe themselves as Chuck Eddy rip-off artists. A writer from Austin tells me his mentor during college was Rob Sheffield. All the academics give props to older academics no one else has ever heard of. And most peculiarly, an unnamed woman with a tragic hairdo asks me if I'm from "the Greil Marcus school of criticism or the Lester Bangs school of thought." I say the latter, but only because I like cough syrup.

DePaul sociologist Deena Weinstein follows Sanneh, and she compares the social contract within a working rock band to the fictionalized existence of the jackalope. I must concede that this is a clear example of "thinking about music in the abstract." Later that morning, I attend a presentation titled "Duran Duran: Video Band?" It turns out the answer to that particular query is, "yes." This strikes me as significantly less abstract.

Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* is the "star" of an afternoon symposium mysteriously dubbed "Dos and Don'ts," and he makes references to the Heisenberg Principle and the formation of Zaire. Pareles follows an affable presentation from University of Iowa's Thomas Swiss (he discusses Jewel's poetry) and precedes a boring British academic who drones on about reggae before advocating the death of capitalism ("I am a socialist," he said during the Q & A portion of the symposium, "and I think we need to change society"). I'm not exactly sure what any of this has to do with pop music, but I do learn that Jewel moved 432,000 hardcover copies of *A Night Without Armor*, thereby making her the best-selling American poet of the past fifty years. At least *she's* not a socialist.

I eat lunch at Turntable, the Experience Music Project restaurant. Now—if someone wanted to be critical of EMP as an inadvertently "antirock" entity—this meal would have been a perfect metaphor, as it was the epitome of ruining something visceral. I ordered "old fashioned" chicken and

dumplings, but I ended up getting the horrific modern incarnation of what some booksmart Seattle hippie imagines the Deep South should taste like. I almost felt like I was being *punished* for ordering something simple. And I suspect that's how anti-intellectuals feel about things like the EMP Pop Conference. They would prefer consuming the philosophical equivalent of McDonald's, which would be asking a fifteen-year-old kid why Hoobastank kicks ass. And it turns out I could have literally done both of these things; EMP is two blocks from a McDonald's, and Hoobastank was playing with Incubus that very night at Key Arena.

However, I ultimately do neither. I just eat my dreadful dumplings and wait around to hear Robert "The Dean of Rock Critics" Christgau discuss whether or not American pop music is still exceptional, although the only part of his speech I remember is when he says, "I don't see any new Nirvanas lurking around, and I don't plan to." I guess he doesn't like Hoobastank, either.

Saturday, April 12, 11:00 A.M.: Right now I'm listening to Sarah Dougher, and she seems deeply offended by something (and possibly by everything). Dougher is a musician and a teacher at Evergreen State College in Olympia, and she's taking issue with the fact that her symposium, titled "Personal Stories," is the only panel at the conference composed exclusively of women. It appears she also has problems with the way her panel is named: "I make music in a sexist world that views the male experience as *general* and the female experience as *personal*," she says. To me, the latter designation actually seems preferable to the former, but what do I know? Dougher later mentions that academia and music are "two of the most sexist professions that exist," further solidifying my suspicion that people attend Evergreen in order to avoid attending life.

This sense of utter unreality is a problem with several of the academic papers at this event; they're often written from completely detached perspectives. Yesterday, some dude from Middle Tennessee State gave a speech about how the threat of terrorism is not worth the chilling effect the recently legislated "Patriot Act" could have on political artists like Sting. This might be true... although I'm guessing it's considerably easier to downplay the threat of terrorism when you work at Middle Tennessee State. I don't see a lot of jets crashing into downtown Murfreesboro.

Still, it would be disingenuous if I didn't mention how innovative (and how clever) some of these presentations truly were. Craig Seymour of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* talked about "boy band slash fiction," outlining how certain fans of 'NSYNC like to imagine Justin Timberlake getting fisted by Lance Bass. Glenn Dixon surmised that much of the Contemporary Christian genre is driven by artists who literally want to fuck Jesus Christ. And the aforementioned Wolk's juice-fueled explanation of how CDs are inappropriately remastered for pop radio was fascinating and insightful. These are all examples of people who truly *did* think about music in new, unconventional ways.

But here's the depressing rub: You know who's *not* thinking about music in new, innovative ways? Musicians. At least not the musicians who came to this conference.

You see, Saturday night was supposed to be the big collision of sound and fury; this was when local "rock stars" were going to take part in a high-profile EMP symposium, simulcast on public radio. The four participants were Mark Arm of Mudhoney, Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney, Sam Coomes of Quasi, and allaround indie rock impresario Calvin Johnson.

And they all had nothing to say.

For two hours, I watched four people stare at the audience, all trying to prove they were cool enough not to care about the attention. None of them had any prepared statements (well, Brownstein *claimed* she did, but then she elected not to read it). None of them wanted to answer any of the moderator's inquiries, and they made fun of half the audience members who dared to ask them questions. Coomes spent all 120 minutes trying to act confused; Arm preferred to play surly; Brownstein opted for a nervously bookish vibe; Johnson just tried to seem weird. At one point, Calvin bemoaned the fact that—since the end of the World War II era—Americans won't even sing "Happy Birthday" at parties, apparently because our willingness to sing in public has become "atrophied." Clearly, Calvin Johnson has never been to an Olive Garden.

"I try not to analyze the process of listening to music," Brownstein begrudgingly said. "The less I think about my art, the better," reiterated Arm. If you take these artists at their word, there is no intellectual element whatsoever to rock music; all you do is walk out on stage and emote. According to them, there's never anything to think (or write) about; in fact, attempts to do so sully the entire creative process.

Luckily, hardly any of the visiting critics or academics attended the musicians' panel, as it happened to be scheduled during suppertime. And honestly, I'm glad they didn't go. Who needs to hear that your life's work is irrelevant? I prefer to imagine all of America's rock geeks breaking bread together, talking about Silkworm songs and Clinic b-sides and forgotten Guided by Voices shows and—maybe for the first time in their lives—feeling completely and utterly normal. I'm sure their orange juice never tasted so sweet.

SOUTHERN-FRIED SEX KITTEN

Britney Spears is the most famous person I've ever interviewed. She was also the weirdest. I assume this is not a coincidence.

The main thing I remember about this interview is that I spent (what seemed like) twelve thousand years waiting for her photo shoot to end. There was minor chaos during the shoot, because—at the last minute—Britney decided she did not want to be photographed pantless, and that specific pantless image was (in truth) the main reason *Esquire* wanted to do a story on her. They needed a pantless Britney on the cover of their magazine. Her refusal created an intense dichotomy among her handlers: Britney's family members didn't want her to do anything overtly sexy, but her publicity team (whom she later fired) *only* wanted her to do things that were overtly sexy. She eventually agreed with her publicist. The singular upside to the photo shoot was the cookies; someone was responsible for providing Britney with warm chocolate chip cookies at all times, and they were fucking awesome.

After I spent my time with Spears, people kept asking me, "What is she *really* like?" My answer was usually, "I don't know, and I don't think she does, either." And that's not sarcasm; I honestly believe Britney Spears was so insulated from the public (and so exhaustively governed by the people trying to control her image) that she became unable to differentiate between (a) the person who was famous and (b) the person she actually was. I suspect this is why she kept making so many strange decisions in the wake of this interview (i.e., getting married in Las Vegas to someone she barely liked, wearing T-shirts that said things like "MILF in Training," constantly being photographed barefoot in public, etc.). Her management team directed so much emphasis toward turning her into an unsophisticated semi-redneck that she now has no idea what is normal and what is marketing. I suppose her life is exciting, but I suspect it's a pretty terrible way to live; I don't think she has any idea what's really happening to her.

That said, I did notice that her Southern accent always seemed to mysteriously disappear whenever she became annoyed with my questions. Maybe she's the blond Machiavelli.

Because the photos that ran with this story were pretty hot, *Esquire* cut about seven hundred words out of my profile to create more space for the

pictures. This is the original draft.

BENDING SPOONS WITH BRITNEY SPEARS

(NOVEMBER 2003)

Twenty feet away from me, Britney Spears is pantless. Her sculpted hair makes her look like Marilyn Monroe on a date with DiMaggio, assuming they're going to Manhattan's finest pantless restaurant. She's wearing a sweater that probably costs more than my parents' house, and her white heels add five inches to her five-foot-four pantless frame. Oh, and did I mention she's pantless? She's not wearing any pants.

This is a hard detail to ignore.

This is a hard detail to ignore because the number of men who have seen a pantless Britney belong to a highly select fraternity: it's Justin Timberlake, her gynecologist, the photographer who's doing this particular photo shoot, and (maybe) the frontman for a fourth-rate rap-metal outfit from Jacksonville, Florida. That's more or less everybody.¹ And—perhaps stupidly—I actually thought I was about to rush this semi-pathetic frat; I honestly believed the reason I was invited to this Manhattan photo shoot was to glimpse Britney's vagina and write about its cultural significance. Somehow, that seemed like the only logical explanation as to why Britney's naked ass was being unleashed on the cover of this magazine; this whole affair must be an aggressive, self-conscious reinvention. I mean, why else would I have been invited here? Why else would Spears have just released the (ahem) “news” that she lost her virginity at the age of eighteen (a story that surfaced only thirty-six hours before this very photo session)? Isn't this how the modern media operates? Isn't everything wholly overt?

Actually, no.

Britney's secret garden will not be seen this afternoon, or at least not seen by me. All her pictures are ultimately shot behind a fifteen-foot-high opaque partition, and nary a heterosexual man is allowed behind its wall. Apparently, the reason I am here is to be reminded that the essence of Britney Spears's rawest sexuality is something *I will never see*, even though I know it's there. This is why I am a metaphor for America, and this is also why Britney Spears is a metaphor for the American Dream. Culturally, there is nothing more trenchant than the fact that Britney Spears will never give it up, even though she already has.

Over the next ninety minutes, I will sit on a couch next to an ostensibly fully clothed Britney and ask her a battery of questions. She will not really answer any of them. Interviewing Britney Spears is like conducting a deposition hearing with Bill Clinton: regardless of the evidence, she does not waiver. “Why do you dress so provocatively?” I ask. She says she doesn’t dress provocatively. “But look what you’re wearing right now,” I say, and I have a point, because I ask this while looking at three inches of her inner thigh, her entire abdomen, and enough cleavage to choke a musk ox. “This is just a shirt and a skirt,” she responds. I ask her questions about her iconography, and she acts as though she has no idea what the word *iconography* even means. It is not that Britney Spears denies that she is a sexual icon, or that she disagrees with the assertion that she embodies the “madonna/whore” dichotomy more than any human in history, or that she feels her success says nothing about what our society fantasizes about. She doesn’t disagree with any of that stuff, because she swears *she has never even thought about it*. Not even once. When I ask her to theorize about why American men are so fascinated with the concept of the wet-hot virgin, she legitimately acts as if it is the first time anyone has ever brought that query to her attention.

“That’s just a weird question,” she says. “I don’t even want to think about that. That’s strange, and I don’t think about things like that, and I don’t want to think about things like that. Why should I? I don’t have to deal with those people. I’m concerned with the kids out there. I’m concerned with the next generation of people. I’m not worried about some guy who’s a perv and wants to meet a freaking virgin.”

And suddenly, something becomes painfully clear: either Britney Spears is the least self-aware person I’ve ever met, or she’s way, way savvier than I shall ever be.

Or maybe both.

Britney smells excellent. She smells like fruit (kiwi in particular). Like many celebrities, she seems smaller in real life than she appears on television, but Spears also looks a little *harder*—sometimes brittle, sometimes fragile. As I ask her questions, I can tell she isn’t comfortable (at one point she gets up and walks away, but stops after five steps and returns to apologize). And the more I badger her, the more I find myself feeling

sorry for dragging her through this process. For whatever the reason, I really want to love this person.

Compared to the depletion of the ozone layer or the war in Liberia, I concede that the existence of Britney Spears is light-years beyond trivial. But if you're remotely interested in the cylinders that drive pop culture, it's hard to overestimate her significance. She is not so much a person as she is an *idea*, and the idea is this: you can want everything, so long as you get nothing. The Western world has always been fixated with the eroticism of purity; that was how Brooke Shields sold Calvin Kleins, and that was how Annette Funicello sold the beach. But no one has ever packaged that schism like Britney Spears. She is the naughtiest good girl of all time. However, this philosophical chasm is not what makes her important; the chasm merely makes her rich. What makes Spears different is her abject unwillingness to recognize that this paradox exists *at all*. She never winks, she never cracks, and she never relents from her abject naïveté.

I realize this does not seem possible; it did not seem possible to me, either. But this is the crux of her genius. Over and over and over again, I interrogate Spears about the motivations behind her career arc, starting with the first video she ever made, "... Baby One More Time." Arguably the last transcendent clip MTV ever aired, the sexual overtones of "... Baby One More Time" seem almost stupidly symbolic. Yet when I tell this to Britney, she finds the suggestion ridiculous.

"I was wearing a freaking Catholic school girl's outfit!" she exclaims, which is (of course) exactly why everyone else in the universe views it as the hyperdriven exploitation of an unabashed taboo. But there is no subtext in Britney World. "I was just dancing and doing what I love. To me, that's truly sexy. In so many videos these days, you see girls with their bras on, and they're just hoochie mamas. *Men don't like that!* Well, maybe some men do—the kind of men I'm not attracted to. But real people just want to see someone having a good time. They want to see someone shine."

This is what makes Britney so different: she refuses to deconstruct herself. That falls in stark contrast with the previous generation of blond icons, most notably Madonna (who makes it clear that she controls every extension of her existence) and Pam Anderson (who refuses to take her own Barbie Doll bombast seriously). Madonna would never claim an outfit was merely "a skirt and a shirt." Pam would never deny that her stardom is

founded on strangers wanting to sleep with her. Both of those women know exactly what they're doing, and they want you to realize that, too. But Spears wants everything to look like an accident, and this is crucial. If Britney were to forfeit anything—if she were to even *casually* admit that she *occasionally* uses her body as a commercial weapon—all of this would be over. She would immediately become like everybody else. But this will never happen. What keeps Britney perfect—what *makes* Britney perfect—is that she can produce a video where people lick the sweat off her body (as they did in 2001's "I'm a Slave 4 U") and still effortlessly insist the song has no relationship to sex whatsoever. ("It's just about being a slave to the music," she tells me.) On the day of our interview, Britney took another photograph for this magazine wearing only panties and pearls, and she pulled down the elastic of her underwear with her thumbs; if she would have pulled two inches more, *Esquire* would have become *Hustler*. But that reality does not affect *her* reality, which is that this picture has nothing to do with sex.

Britney: Haven't you ever seen girls on the covers of magazines before? Did you see the J-Lo cover? She was wearing a bikini. Did you see the cover with Cameron Diaz on it?

CK: Yes I did. And why do you think those women did those photo shoots?

Britney: Because it's the freaking cover of *Esquire* magazine! Why not? You get to look beautiful. It's not that deep.

CK: So why exactly do you think the magazine puts women like that on its cover?

Britney: I don't know. Maybe because those people are pretty and appealing, and they work their asses off, and they believe in themselves.

CK: Do you honestly believe that?

Britney: Well, some people might say it's just to make money off of them and to sell magazines. But another reason—a better reason, and the one I choose—is that they do it to inspire people.

Britney is like the little kid who freaks out Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*: You say you want to bend a spoon? Well, the first thing you need to realize is that *there is no spoon*.

I'm not supposed to ask Britney about Justin Timberlake. This rule is made very clear to me the moment I arrive at the photo shoot. Granted, everyone knows that Spears and the former 'N Sync member used to live together, and everyone knows about their breakup, and everyone knows they (evidently) had sex when Spears was eighteen. But her handlers still request that I don't ask any questions about their relationship. When I eventually ask Spears about this anyway, her response is extraordinarily innocuous. "The bottom line—and I hate talking about this, but whatever—is that we were both too young to be that serious with each other." However, she does say that the alleged postbreakup "dance-off" at the L.A. club Lounge never happened, and she admits that she and Justin don't speak anymore, even though she considers him a "creative genius."

Viewed retrospectively, there's no doubt the Justin-Britney romance helped Timberlake's career more than hers—especially since Spears always insisted she was a virgin, even when they were living together. Optimistic thirteen-year-old girls could imagine Justin as the ultimate gentleman, perfectly content to keep his paws to himself while the foxiest girl on the planet sat around the house in her underwear, sucking on Popsicles and telling him to wait until she was ready. They were, in a sense, Virgin Royalty: super-rich, *über*-clean pop stars who epitomized just how wonderful teenage Americans could still be.

This is why it was so jarring to hear Fred Durst on *The Howard Stern Show* in February, graphically discussing his alleged sexual dalliances with Spears. Her encounter with the Limp Bizkit vocalist—regardless of its truth—publicly cemented Spears's fall from grace; Durst is universally perceived as rock's sleaziest baboon. Yet the moment Britney "explains" what happened, the gravity of the situation deflates. Here again, Spears's persona becomes weirdly Clintonesque: deny, deny, deny ... and then classify everything as old news.

"That was my fault for hanging out with people like that," she says of Durst. "Fred was a very great guy. He was a nice guy. And at the time he was trying to come on to me, I wasn't in the right frame of mind to have a relationship with anybody. So maybe I did hurt his ego, and [going on the radio] was his way of dealing with that. But I learned my lesson. And at the time, I was kind of confused, because my tour had just ended. Me and my girlfriends went out one night, and I was feeling like a free bird. But I really don't want to talk about this."

I have no idea what those last two statements are supposed to mean; either she obviously slept with him, or she obviously didn't. The odds are 50–50. And this is a balance Britney either (a) consciously strives for, or (b) sustains without even trying. Cliché as it may sound, she is truly all things to all people: a twelve-year-old girl thinks she's a hero; that girl's older brother thinks she's a stripper; that older brother's girlfriend thinks she's an example of why women hate themselves; that girlfriend's father secretly wishes his own twelve-year-old daughter would invite Britney over for a slumber party. As long as she never dictates her character—as long as Spears never overtly says “This is who I am”—everyone gets to inject their own meaning. Subconsciously, we all get to rebrand Britney Spears.

“The public knows when someone is being honest,” she says. “The people know what's real. This might be a weird analogy, but it's like watching *Friends* on the TV. You just get what those people are talking about. It's funny to you, and you're drawn into them.”

Here again, we see the brilliance of Britney: on the surface, this statement is insane. Anyone who watches *Friends* would never argue it's successful because of its authenticity, nor would it seem like those characters have conversations that reflect any kind of tangible normalcy.² But every single week, twenty million people watch *Friends*. They see something in Chandler Bing and Phoebe Buffay that makes them happy. And what those twenty million people see is something that Britney sees—and perhaps Britney *understands*—in a way that most of us do not.

“Had I not went into music,” she tells me, “I probably would have gone to college and became a schoolteacher. That was my dream, because I love kids. Either that, or an entertainment lawyer.” For a moment, I think this is a joke. But it's not a joke. But it's brilliant. Schoolteacher, entertainment lawyer, pop star, African warlord—what's the fucking difference? “I'm famous,” she concedes, “but I'm not famous like freaking Brad Pitt or Jennifer Aniston. But in my weird little head, I just think we're all here to inspire each other. We're all equal. We just bounce off of each other and show the world what we can do.”

Logic would suggest that Spears's upcoming fourth album will be a reinvention, and that she will try to attract a more mature audience (much like Christina Aguilera did with her album *Stripped* and a freshly conceived “Gothic Hooker” image). Britney says nay. “Actually, the record label wanted me to do certain kinds of songs, and I was like, ‘Look, if you want

me to be some kind of sex thing, that's not me.' I will never do that. I'm still doing what I love to do."

So that settles it. Don't be fooled by the photos that accompany this story, true believers: Britney Spears is not going to become "some kind of sex thing." She is still the person you want to imagine. She always will be. And she is making that decision; you are not.

"I was just talking about sexuality with my makeup artist," she tells me a mere ten minutes into our conversation, "and I was explaining to her that—when I was thirteen years old—I used to walk around my house completely naked. And my dad would say, 'Britney, put some clothes on, we have people over.' My family just always walked around the house naked. We were earthy people. I've never been ashamed of my body. We were very free people."

True. And I'm sure this has no freaking significance whatsoever.

1. Because I write about popular culture in the present tense, it's not uncommon for things I write to become inaccurate over time. This sentence, however, is a particularly insane example of that phenomenon. At this point, I would be pretty surprised if anyone reading this book has *not* seen Britney Spears's vagina. Modernity!

[2](#). In retrospect, I might be wrong on this point. I think the evolution of *Friends* over its ten seasons makes my argument seem reasonable, because—after about 1998—the show had completely transgressed into a vehicle for the on-screen personalities of its six stars. By its conclusion, none of the characters on *Friends* seemed even semi-real and all the dialogue sounded like skit comedy. But when the program was conceived in 1994, most of the action was built around relatively plausible problems; I recall one episode from the second season where three of the characters (Chandler, Ross, and Monica) had decent jobs while the other three were essentially unemployed, and that economic disparity created a class issue among people who normally perceived themselves as peers (and which manifested itself through a Hootie and the Blowfish concert). This is a common problem for young people who enter the job market immediately after college, as many of their collegiate friends are left eating ramen noodles while they earn actual money. This, I suppose, would suggest that *Friends* did illustrate “authenticity” and “normalcy.” Britney is like Max Weber.

(THIS HAPPENED IN)

OCTOBER

U2 is the most self-aware rock band in history. This generally works to their advantage.

There are myriad reasons why U2 has been successful, but the quality I found most relevant was the depth of their inwardly focused consciousness. They are not an inauthentic band, but they are also not an organic band; nothing about U2 is accidental. ABC sports broadcaster Al Michaels likes to tell an anecdote about Howard Cosell: Michaels claims he once watched Cosell break up a fistfight between a couple of anonymous thugs. After it was over, Michaels asked Cosell how he found the guts to get involved in a random street brawl between two hyperaggressive maniacs, both of whom could have killed him. "I know who I am," Cosell said in response. Bono is the same way; Bono knows who he is.

What Bono can see (and what so many other groups tend to miss) is the relationship between capitalism and freedom. U2 never had to worry about Island Records interfering with their musical vision because the band understands a very basic equation: as long as they make everyone money, they will be allowed to do whatever they want. It's assumed that any time an entity becomes corporate, that entity loses its autonomy; this was not the case with U2. As U2 grew larger and larger, they actually became more free. When I met them in fall of 2004, they had a limitless kind of autonomy that surpassed any indie band on any independent label. I've never met a rock group more satisfied with the condition of their career.

Because Bono always behaves like he's being filmed for a documentary, he gave me bushels of material. I think I was able to type this entire piece in less than an hour. However, the rest of the experience sucked. Dublin was cold and wet, and the pubs were filled with American tourists who didn't understand how to be drunk in public. All my friends at *SPIN* told me that I would love Ireland and that complete strangers would want to make conversation at every bar I stumbled into; this only happened once, and the guy turned out to be a Norwegian white supremacist. I had one good meal, and it was at a Hard Rock Cafe. I should never go anywhere.

MYSTERIOUS DAYS

(DECEMBER 2004)

“The job of art is to chase away ugliness,” Bono tells me as he twists the ignition key of his Maserati Quattroporte. “So let’s start with the roads. Cars are so ugly. America is supposedly the country that brought us the love of the automobile, yet they haven’t produced a beautiful car in decades. Americans used to make feminine cars with a sense of humor, but now it’s all SUVs. The Germans kind of picked up the slack for a while, but the Italians ultimately were the ones that took them on. But the Italians pick such arrogant names. Do you know what *Quattroporte* means? Four-door. It means four-door.”

Bono laughs, and I pretend to understand why this is funny. I’m not sure why an expository word like *quattro-porte* would seem pretentious, but I certainly can’t disagree with his core argument: this is not an ugly car. This is, in fact, the nicest automobile I’ve ever touched; I’ve never even had a dream that included a vehicle like this. Sitting in the passenger seat is like being inside a spaceship. I have just spent the last two hours interviewing Bono about the new U2 album, *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, their tenth career album and their first release in over four years. He is about to drive me back to the Clarence Hotel in Dublin’s Temple Bar area, a hotel that Bono co-owns with guitarist the Edge (and which includes a restaurant where Bono plans to have supper with an eighty-two-year-old Irish painter). Our conversation (conducted on the ground floor of U2’s headquarters and recording studio) touched on numerous questions, some about music but mostly about politics and celebrity and the meaning of freedom. However, there is only one question about U2 that actually matters, and I’m still trying to figure it out while this four-door Maserati backs out of the studio’s garage: is Bono for real, or is Bono full of shit?

We begin driving away from the studio, a faceless two-story building nestled along the canal in Dublin’s most relentlessly industrial neighborhood. Suddenly, Bono—who is wearing sunglasses to spite the darkness—spots four teenagers sitting on a bench in the dark, huddled next to some U2 graffiti and bundled in sweaters (it’s fifty degrees outside, but it feels colder). Two of the girls are from Belgium, one girl is from Austria, and one guy is Irish. They have been sitting there for seven hours, hoping to see anything that vaguely resembles a transcendent rock band. “I’m going

to talk to these kids,” Bono says as he stops the Maserati and jumps out. I can see him signing autographs in the rearview mirror. This strikes me as quaint, and I begin jotting down the event in my notebook. But then Bono opens the trunk and throws the teenagers’ bags inside. Suddenly, there are four pale kids climbing into the backseat of this car. I guess we’re lucky this is a Quattroporte.

“We’re gonna give these kids a ride,” says Bono. I look over my right shoulder at the girl from Austria, and I am able to see what it looks like when someone’s mind is blown out of her skull; I can almost see her brains and blood splattered across the rear window. The car takes off; Bono drives recklessly, accelerating and braking at random intervals. “Do you want to hear the new album?” he asks the glassy-eyed teenagers. This was over a month before *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* would be released. They say yes. Bono punches up track four, “Love and Peace or Else.” He hits the play button, and it’s loud; it sounds like someone dropping the throttle on a Harrier jump jet. Bono starts singing along, harmonizing with himself. He’s playing air drums while he drives. The music changes, and he exclaims, “This is the Gary Glitter part!” The music changes again. “This is the Brian Wilson moment!” The teenagers aren’t even talking; they’re just kind of looking at one another, almost like they’re afraid this is some Celtic version of *Punk’d*. One of the kids specifically asks to hear “Miracle Drug,” which makes Bono nervous; he is worried that the album may have leaked to the Internet. But he plays it anyway, still singing along, and he turns the volume even higher when we get to the lyrics “Freedom has a scent / Like the top of a newborn baby’s head.” He calls these two lines the best on the album. This behavior is incredibly charming, and a little embarrassing, and amazingly weird. But we eventually get to the hotel, and Bono drives up on the sidewalk. He unloads the kids’ bags, and they walk away like zombies. The two of us amble into the Clarence. We shake hands in the lobby, and then Bono disappears into the restaurant to meet some aging painter I’ve never heard of. And I find myself thinking, *Did this really just happen? Am I supposed to believe he does this kind of thing all the time, even when he doesn’t have a reporter in the front seat of his car? And does that even matter? Was that car ride the greatest moment in those four kids’ lives? Was this whole thing a specific performance, or is Bono’s entire life a performance? And if your entire life is a performance, does that make*

everything you do inherently authentic? Is this guy for real, or is this guy completely full of shit?

Which is kind of how our conversation had started two hours ago.

Two hours before I sat in his Maserati with some freaked-out Belgian teenagers, Bono and I began our dialogue about rock 'n' roll by discussing a computer company. I had already interviewed bassist Adam Clayton two days before, and he was fine (he was smart and sarcastic, and he has very large hands). I had interviewed the Edge earlier that afternoon, and he was equally fine (serious and soft-spoken and wearing that stupid skullcap). I'll talk to drummer Larry Mullen next week over the telephone, and he will be likewise affable. They are all quotable people, and—within the context of the band—they are all equally important. Their longtime producer Brian Eno once said U2 was “the only real group” he'd ever met, because their music is so dependent on the interlocking, democratic nature of the songwriting. But from a cultural perspective—from the perspective of someone who is interested in what U2 is supposed to *mean*—Bono is pretty much the whole band. He's probably the least musical member of U2, but he talks more than the other three members combined—I have never met anyone who likes being interviewed more than Bono.¹ He can talk about anything. And the first thing he talks about is the kind of thing rock singers rarely talk about; the first thing he talks about is Steve Jobs.

“The company that best exemplifies the marriage of technology and pop culture is Apple,” Bono says as he paces the floor. “They understand music. They like music. They like the art object. The iPod is probably the greatest pop object since the electric guitar. We—as a band—feel strongly about the iPod. We—as a band—talked about the idea for an iPod years ago. We—as a band—are fans of Apple.”

We are in a room with a telephone. Bono points to the telephone.

“We have just now—ten minutes ago—made a partnership with Apple, right on that very phone,” he continues. “We want to work with them. The Edge wants to work with their scientists. We want to play with their design team. We want to be in their commercial. We will do a commercial with Apple for our album, and no money will change hands—which is important, because we have been offered boatloads of money from many other people. But we will make an Apple commercial that's as good as any video. And next year, you will be able to go to a U2 show and download the

concert onto your iPod. We're going to make a digital box set, where you can get every U2 album and every U2 B-side and every U2 lyric, all at once. We want to do this because we like their company. It's art, commerce, and technology colliding."

It strikes me that Bono is talking about Apple the same way he talks about Rwandan genocide. He is nothing if not charismatic; if he worked in advertising, we would probably say he has a strong "force of personality." But it also feels a little odd to hear the leader of a rock band talking about how awesome it's going to be to make a commercial for a computer company. I ask him if this partnership will require some kind of compromise, or if this move could somehow bring U2's credibility into question.

"I'm very fond of Steve [Jobs] personally," he responds. "I'm a fan of his company. And you know, we already operate within this kind of corporate structure. We've all been whining about how white rock 'n' roll has its head in the sand on a lot of these issues and how hip-hop has a much more honest approach. Russell Simmons laughs at all those middle-class college kids who are preoccupied with the fear of selling out. I've never been afraid of commerce. I've never been afraid of people who run music companies. There is this cliché that artists are pure and businesspeople can't be trusted. Well, in my life I've met a lot of artists who were real assholes, and I've met a lot of businessmen who walk their dogs. So these things aren't true. We need new thinking."

"New thinking" is one of Bono's critical buzzwords: he wants the world to think differently about many, many things. He wants people to realize the war against AIDS is much more significant than the war against Iraq. He wants American taxpayers to believe that forgiving third world nations of their debt is more beneficial to the world than forcing them to pay it back. These are the causes he has embraced, and not without success; Bono is the most tangibly successful rock 'n' roll activist of all time (he's certainly the only rock star who has been taken seriously by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, ultra-right-wing North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, and former U.S. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill). This is the man who prompted *Time* magazine to rhetorically ask whether or not he could "save the world." So when one considers how much power Bono actually wields, and when one considers the state of the planet, and when one considers that U2 is metaphorically using words like *dismantle* and *bomb* in the context of

an album title, one might assume that this U2 album will be the most overtly political album of 2004.

Which it is not.

How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb is not political at all; it's a wholly personal album, and many of the songs were inspired by the death of Bono's father, Bob Hewson, who succumbed to cancer in August 2001. The songwriting process worked as it normally does for the band: the Edge brought in guitar demos, the band collaborated on the sonic skeletons and turned them into U2 songs, and Bono added the lyrics at the end. And though Bono fully intended these songs to be political, it just didn't happen.

"When we make a record, it's not a contrived process," explains the Edge in his signature monotone. "It's not like we sit down and say, 'We're going to write about this.' I don't think any of us thought, *Let's make a political record*. But we certainly thought that was going to be part of it. I am a little bit surprised that it's so personal. I was expecting it to be a *little* more political, but it hasn't gone that way."

What's most interesting about Edge's sentiment is how hard the band openly worked toward that goal. The album's first single, "Vertigo" (which oddly resembles the Supremes' "You Keep Me Hanging On") was originally titled "Native Son," and every single lyric was different; originally, it was *completely* a political track. But it felt forced; this was not a rebel song. What Bono ultimately realized is that you cannot be political just because other people assume it's your job. No matter how many times he appears on *The O'Reilly Factor*, he's still more of an artist than a politician.

"I write feelings, not thoughts," Bono says while lying on a leather couch, the caricature of a therapy patient. "Feelings are much stronger than thoughts. We are all led by instinct, and our intellect catches up later.² This album proves that point. I would have certainly preferred to take on the issues that I deal with politically, but what came out of me were the other things in my life I wasn't tending to: my family, the hypocrisy of my own heart, and my father's death. I mean, why aren't I spending more time with my kids? Why am I trying to save other people's kids instead? How can I sing about love when I'm never at home? There are a lot of things that need to be addressed in the world. But those other things just came pouring out of me."

By the time you read this, the United States either has the same president it had a few weeks ago or it has a new president who is taller. That was not the case when I spoke to U2; during the week of our interviews, it was still September. Not surprisingly, we talked about the impending election (even less surprising, the Irish are far more interested in America than Americans are interested in Ireland). The Edge was open about his support for John Kerry, but Bono—supremely aware that he will have to work with whomever wins—remained staunchly nonpartisan. “I have forsaken my ability to talk about this issue,” he said, and I find it hilarious that he actually used the word *forsaken*. For the past twenty-five years, countless people have referred to Bono as “messianic.” Now he actually talks like Jesus.

Bono’s nonpartisanship has been the catalyst for everything he and his band have accomplished; it’s why he can work with legitimate political figures in a meaningful way, and it’s why U2 can become business partners with Apple without giving up on rock ‘n’ roll. But it does raise a paradox: the reason U2 were (arguably) the most important band of the 1980s was because audiences felt they *always* took a side. What makes “Sunday Bloody Sunday” a powerful song is that something seemed to be at stake, even if you had no idea what happened in Northern Ireland during the winter of 1972. If anything, U2 seemed to care about things too much; there was no middle of the road on the drive toward Joshua Tree. And somewhat surprisingly, the band now expresses mild sheepishness about the 1980s, even though that era made them famous.

“If you had to reduce U2 down to the waving of the white flag, which is a moment from the *War* tour, that would be the worst thing,” says Clayton when I ask what he hopes U2 will *not* be remembered for in fifty years. “At the time, I think it was in the spirit of the performance. But we weren’t very ironic people back then. We were pretty serious people, and we didn’t see that we could have been a little more subtle about things like that. But, hey, as mistakes go, that’s probably not a bad one.”

Part of that revisionism might have to do with age; U2 have now moved into the ever-expanding idiom of Rock Bands Who Could Have Plausibly Fathered the People Who Now Buy Most of Their Albums (Bono is forty-four; Edge, forty-three; Clayton, forty-four; Mullen, forty-two). Their ironic distance also seems to be a product of the 1997 *Pop* album and its subsequent Pop-Mart tour, two projects that largely failed. “I think what

happened with that record was this fusion of electronica and the club world, which was not foreign to us,” says Clayton. “But what we should have focused on were tracks that were going to be radio friendly. We presented tracks that sounded—in a European context—absolutely appropriate to what we’d hear on the radio. That whole record did a lot better in Europe. But American programmers wouldn’t play it. I think that was where we kind of screwed up.”

Still, the decision to tour with a giant lemon was important; it was the point where U2’s aesthetic changed completely. And this is still happening today: they are actively trying not to be self-aware, which (by definition) is completely impossible. But they’re still trying.

“I don’t think anyone who’s famous didn’t *want* to be famous,” says Bono, which might be true for everybody but is certainly true for him. “The people who hide in the shadows and cover their heads with their coats when they’re being photographed by the paparazzi probably think being famous is more important than it actually is, and—in a way—probably need fame more than anyone else. I’ve gotten to the stage where I almost forget I’m in a rock band, which was never the case in the 1980s. And that was annoying, because that wasn’t sexy. Self-consciousness is never sexy. I mean, I’ve watched myself being interviewed on TV, and I just think to myself, *What an asshole.*”

While I am in Dublin, Larry Mullen is in New York; when I return to New York, Larry Mullen returns to Dublin. For the past nine years, Mullen has been racked with back pain he credits to having never been taught how to play drums; because he sits behind the kit incorrectly, and because he holds his sticks incorrectly, and because he basically just “enjoys hitting things,” his spine has paid the price. He missed our scheduled initial conversation because he had to get medical treatment in the States. One of the things Bono casually mentioned in our interview was that Mullen is “incapable of lying,” an interesting quality to employ when describing a coworker. When Mullen telephones a week later, I describe the situation with Bono and his Maserati and the teenagers, and I ask if this was a constructed event or a guileless occurrence.

“Well, it would be very easy for me to just say, ‘Yes, it was guileless,’ because how would you ever know if I was lying?” Mullen says. “But the truth is that Bono really *does* do stuff like that all the time. He really has

this insatiable urge to be all things to all people, even when we try to stop him. Now, does he act differently today than he did twenty-five years ago? Of course. But he has always had this desire to be everything. Bono thinks rock 'n' roll is so shallow, in a way. He has always enjoyed the trappings of fame, but he feels this urge to balance it with something more substantial. He really is a walking contradiction. It's always all or nothing with him. There is almost nothing in the middle."

Like the other members of U2, Mullen—who technically founded the band by pinning a "musicians wanted" note on a school bulletin board as a fifteen-year-old—has slowly come to recognize just how bizarre his life has been. Like most bands, the 1979 incarnation of U2 had impossible dreams: they wanted to become famous, and they wanted to be on the radio constantly. They wanted to change the cultural climate. They wanted to be the Beatles and the Stones of their generation. But unlike 99.9 percent of fledgling rock bands, all of that pretty much happened.

"I think Bono probably did have a clear goal," says Mullen. "But I was fifteen when we started playing. I was just enjoying the experience. And we had to work harder than most bands, because we couldn't play and we didn't understand songwriting at all. The truth is that we all had dreams, and we all wanted to be transcendent, but I don't think anyone really believed any of that would happen."

But here's the thing: I think Bono *did* believe all that would happen. And even if he didn't believe it, he's certainly spent a lot of time thinking about it, because it seems like he's thought about everything. At one point, we talked about the Pixies, one of roughly eighteen thousand artists Bono claims to adore. One of the things Bono loves about the Pixies was that they "invented something." I ask Bono if he thinks U2 invented anything. His answer is like Bill Clinton's speech after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing³—it's somehow completely natural and completely rehearsed (at the exact same time).

"Oh yeah," Bono says, and—as he talks—I can vaguely hear the Edge playing the intro to "I Will Follow" through the walls of the studio. "I wouldn't be holding my head up this high if I didn't think that. If I can use the analogy of the spectrum, I think there are certain colors we absolutely own—certain sounds, certain emotions. We can write songs about God and have them right next to songs about girls. I think we weave God, sex, and politics together in a way that's very unusual in white music. And I'm not

saying this is a reason that someone should like our music, or that it proves we're great—but I do think that can be said with some objectivity. I hope that doesn't sound arrogant."

Well, it sort of does. But arrogance doesn't matter if you're right.

[1](#). This, however, is a little deceptive: I just received a copy of *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas*. The book is essentially a one-person oral history; it's a transcript of several dialogues between Bono and Assayas, a French journalist and longtime U2 fanatic. Many of the seemingly off-the-cuff remarks Bono made to me in October of 2004 were identical to things he said to Assayas during an interview they'd conducted two years earlier, all the way down to the specific words Bono stressed for emphasis. Like I said, nothing about U2 is accidental. But—then again—Assayas and I asked a lot of the same questions; I suppose it would actually be more troubling if he had said things that were completely different.

2. This sentence is probably the best description of U2's career I've ever heard.

[3](#). You may have noticed that this is the second time I've compared a musician's oratory style to that of Bill Clinton. I once made a similar analogy between Clinton and Britney Spears (although for very different reasons).

1,400 MEXICAN MOZ FANS CAN'T BE (TOTALLY) WRONG

One of the inherent problems with feature writing is that the slant for most stories is decided long before the journalist goes anywhere or talks to anyone. This is nobody's fault; it's just how things work. In order to get a story assigned, either the editor or the writer has to create a *reason* for why said story needs to be written. As a result, the proposed thesis of an article often becomes its ultimate conclusion. And this is (usually) a bad idea, since these presuppositions are (usually) totally wrong.

This is one example where that problem was avoided by accident: no one had any idea what the original thesis was supposed to be. I was living in Akron, and an editor from *SPIN* e-mailed me and said, "Hey, do you want to go to a Smiths convention in Los Angeles and write something about it?" I asked what I should write about. He said, "I have no fucking idea. I'm not sure why we're even doing this story, to be totally honest. Just go there and find some freaks." What neither of us knew, of course, was that the overwhelming majority of hard-core Smiths fans in the L.A. area are Latino teenagers, which still seems bizarre to me. But it made for a nice story that was almost completely unreliant on freaks.

One person at this Smiths convention (who was ultimately cut from the story) was a white dude in his midtwenties. I can't remember his name, but his claim to fame was winning Morrissey look-alike contests. He didn't sing and wasn't a musician, but he claimed he could dance exactly like Morrissey (and he did resemble Mr. Moz, although he was trying pretty hard to make that happen). He had won something like seven or eight of these contests over the past three years. But what was so intriguing about this guy was that he intended to turn his pastime into a full-time job; he hoped to make a living by looking like Morrissey's clone. However, he didn't have much of a strategy for making this a reality. I remember asking him, "How will you earn money by looking like Morrissey, considering that you don't do anything else?" He said, "Oh, I don't know. I'm sure I could do in-store appearances around Los Angeles and San Francisco whenever a new Morrissey album is released." this seemed like a dangerous career move, particularly since morrissey once went eight years without releasing an album. "That's a good point," he said when I mentioned that fact.

“Maybe I’ll have to do in-store appearances for Johnny Marr solo albums, too.”

VIVA MORRISSEY!

(AUGUST 2002)

People feel nervous around Cruz Rubio. That’s unfair, but it’s true. He looks like a badass: Dude is twenty years old, he’s from East Los Angeles, the sleeves are ripped off his flannel shirt, and he looks like an extra from the movie *Colors*. I have no doubt whatsoever that he could kick the shit out of me on principle. But I am not nervous around Cruz Rubio. I am not nervous, because he is telling me how Morrissey makes him weep.

“Some nights I lay in my bedroom and I listen to ‘There Is a Light That Never Goes Out,’ and I cry,” he tells me. “I cry and cry and cry. I cry like a little bitch, man.”

Perhaps you are wondering what a cut-like-marble Latino could possibly see in a quintessentially British, marvelously effeminate white guy best known for reading Oscar Wilde and sporting his espoused asexuality on his sweater sleeve. Frankly, there’s no concrete answer to that question. But Cruz Rubio is definitely seeing *something*, because he is not the exception; within the walls of the sixth annual Smiths/Morrissey convention in Hollywood’s Palace Theater, he is the rule.

For two days in April, fans of a disbanded Mancunian pop group and its forgotten frontman smoked clove cigarettes, picked over U.K. bootlegs, and danced to “Hairdresser on Fire” like dehydrated Helen Kellers, which is how people at Smiths conventions are supposed to behave. Yet these fans are not the glowering white semi-goths you’d expect to encounter; this scene looks like a 1958 sock hop in Mexico City. To argue that Morrissey’s contemporary audience skews Hispanic would be inaccurate; Morrissey’s contemporary audience *is* Hispanic, at least in L.A. Of the 1,400 people at this year’s convention, at least 75 percent of the ticket buyers—virtually all under twenty—were Latino. For reasons that may never be completely understood, teenage Hispanics tend to be the only people who still care about Manchester’s saddest sack. But they care a lot.

“He speaks to us, man. As Latinos. He addresses us personally,” Rubio explains. “His music fits our lifestyle. I mean, where was the one place

Morrissey always said he was dying to tour? It was Mexico, man. That's where his heart is."

Moments later, twenty-three-year-old construction worker Albert Velazquez expresses a nearly identical sentiment. "The last time I saw him live, he looked into the audience and said, 'I wish I had been born Mexican, but it's too late now.' Those were his exact words. And the crowd just exploded. He loves the Mexican culture, and he understands what we go through."

Velazquez is 235 pounds and six foot five (six foot eight if you include his pompadour). He plans to celebrate Morrissey's birthday on May 22; everybody at this convention seems to know that date. Velazquez also tells me he's going to drink a few Coronas that afternoon, because that's Morrissey's favorite beer. Everyone seems to know that, too.

Morrissey once sang that we must look to Los Angeles for the language we use, because London is dead. And so it is: The question is no longer "How soon is now?"; the question is "*¿Es realmente tan extraño?*"

• • •

The fact that the Smiths have sustained a cult following fifteen years after their demise is understandable. They were a band built for the darkly obsessive. In a decade categorized by excess, the Smiths—and especially their sexually baffling frontman—were introspective, iconoclastic, and alienated. There weren't "casual" Smiths fans in the America of 1986; it was an all-or-nothing equation. Though superstars in the U.K., the Smiths were fringe interlopers in the U.S.—the well-read pop-rock gods for the fey underground. That being the case, it isn't surprising to discover there's been a Smiths/"Moz" convention in Los Angeles every year since 1997. It's easy to imagine thirty-year-old ex-wallflowers digging out their black turtlenecks and reminiscing about how *The Queen Is Dead* convinced them not to hang themselves while everyone else was at the prom. Generally, that's who rock conventions appeal to—aging superfans embracing nostalgia.

That's why this Smiths convention is so startling. Those predictably pasty people don't show up (at least not in significant numbers). For the kids who live between the 5 and 10 highways in East L.A., this is a contemporary event, even though Morrissey hasn't released a solo album in five years. These new Morrissey fans—these Latino "neo-Mozzers"—see him as a completely relevant artist. Moreover, their interest goes against the grain of

traditional Caucasian Moz fans; these kids like Morrissey's solo material as much as his work with the Smiths, and almost nobody here gives a damn about Johnny Marr (the guitarist originally perceived as the Smiths' true genius). Nobody even seems to care about Britpop in general. The focus is almost singularly on the forty-three-year-old Steven P. Morrissey and his infinite sadness.

"Morrissey's family emigrated to England from Ireland, and they were kind of socially segregated from the rest of the country," says Gloria Antunez, a twenty-three-year-old junior-high teacher who uses Morrissey lyrics as a teaching tool in her English class, most notably "Reader Meet Author" from 1995's *Southpaw Grammar*. "That's very similar to the Latino experience here in Los Angeles. We see things within his songs that we can particularly relate to. He sings about loneliness. He sings about solitude. Those are things any minority group can relate to."

The impact of Morrissey's immigration experience is the most widespread hypothesis for why he's been embraced by Mexican Americans, but the theory has flaws. He's never mentioned or implied it in any of his songs, and it seems the majority of Latino neo-Mozzers have never even considered the significance of that connection. "I don't think it has anything to do with immigration," says Kristin Kaiser, a twenty-two-year-old who looks like a bookish Penélope Cruz. "The greasers are into him because they completely associate Morrissey with rockabilly, which pisses off some of the original Smiths fans," explains Kaiser's friend Michelle Perez. "But what pisses me off more is when people try to say the 'pomp' evolved from Morrissey. I don't think so, man."

Perez is referring to the second-most common explanation for the Hispanic Moz revival—that Morrissey's flirtation with rockabilly invokes Latino "greaser" culture, à la the 1950s of James Dean and Ritchie Valens. Morrissey hired rockabilly musicians for 1992's *Your Arsenal*; though it's impossible to quantify, one suspects this movement started in earnest sometime after the release of that album. It's also possible that Morrissey's L.A. address amplifies his local profile, although he's infamously reclusive and never attends these conventions. (Despite repeated attempts, Morrissey couldn't be reached for this piece.) But maybe it's much simpler than that. Maybe it's just that Latino kids still hear what conflicted bookworms heard during the Reagan administration: the soul of a man who's tirelessly romantic, yet perpetually unloved. Assembly-line stars such as Ricky

Martin and Enrique Iglesias simply can't touch the authenticity of Morrissey's quiet desperation.

"We're passionate people. He's passionate like us," says Martha Barreras, standing outside the Palace doors with her well-coiffed, tattooed boyfriend. "The music our parents played when we were growing up was always about love and emotion, and it's the same thing with Morrissey."

It's possible this whole "Why do Latinos love Morrissey?" question will haunt us forever. Fortunately, Canadian academics are on the case.

Colin Snowsell is a thirty-one-year-old PhD candidate at Montreal's prestigious McGill University. He couldn't make it to the Smiths convention because he was busy working on his dissertation, an extension of his master's thesis, *Monty, Morrissey, and Mediatized Utopia*. Frankly, Snowsell doesn't know how all this happened, either—but he's certainly thought about this paradox more than most.

"It really seems like Morrissey wouldn't have any career whatsoever if it wasn't for these Latino fans," Snowsell says. "The rest of the world sees him as a has-been, by and large, and it's rare to see Morrissey covered by the media in any way that isn't negative. But maybe Latino kids don't read the Anglo media."

There's no question that Morrissey's persona has been universally hammered over the past decade,¹ especially in the U.K. Though the British weekly *New Musical Express* recently classified the Smiths as the most influential act of the last fifty years, that publication often paints Morrissey as a self-absorbed caricature, fascinated by skinhead culture and bent on alienating his adoring minions.

Meanwhile, there are signs that he's aware of—and enthused by—his new fan base. He dubbed a recent tour *¡Oye Esteban!* and has performed while wearing a Mexico belt buckle. Perhaps more significant, rumors persist that Morrissey wants to serve as the opening act for a Mexican rock group called Jaguares at the Hollywood Bowl, a venue he sold out as a headliner ten years ago.

"If he's trying to get back his old Smiths fans, I don't think opening for a Mexican rock band would be the way to do it," Snowsell says. "I think he relishes being seen as a messianic figure among these young Latino fans, and I think he feels it validates his relevance. Morrissey has really done everything in his power to reject his old fans. I suspect he'd love it if the

only people who cared about him were these Hispanic kids. I think he hates the fact that he tried to change the world, but most of those original Smiths fans now see him as no different than Echo and the Bunnymen.”

Snowsell’s use of the word *messianic* is telling, particularly when applied to someone like nineteen-year-old Carlos Torres, who tells me “Morrissey is like God” and is “immortal.” However, when Torres talks about the time he met Morrissey at an in-store record signing, he illustrates the most confusing aspect of neo-Moz culture: just about everybody who’s ever seen or heard Morrissey assumes he is gay—except for these Latino kids.

“I kissed Morrissey once,” Torres says. “I kissed his hand. I wish I would have kissed him, but his hand was good enough. But I’m not gay or anything. It’s just that he’s Morrissey, you know? There is sort of a homophobic vibe among some Latinos, and they seem to think, *Well, we like him, so he can’t be gay.* But that’s stupid.”

Torres’s take is pretty liberal; a few Latinos at the convention concede that Morrissey might be bisexual, but none would classify him as gay. “People are always asking me if I’m gay because I have a photo of Morrissey hugging Johnny Marr,” says Alex Diaz, a sixteen-year-old Smiths fanatic who plans on joining the Marines when he’s old enough. “My friends always ask me, ‘Why do you like these queers?’ But, you know, he’s probably just bisexual. His songs aren’t all about guys. Look at ‘Girlfriend in a Coma’—that’s about a girl.² I think there probably would be some people who’d hate it if Morrissey ever came out and said he was gay, but, personally, I don’t really care. And like I said, he’s probably bisexual.”

Though it’s understandable how a culture that invented the term *machismo* might be uncomfortable lionizing a gay icon, it’s ironic that Morrissey has now been adopted by two diametrically opposed subcultures. Fifteen years ago, closeted gay teens loved Morrissey because they thought he shared their secret; today, future Marines try to ignore the fact that their hero might find them foxy.

Young Latinos worship an aging Brit who aspires to live at the YWCA and get hit by a double-decker bus, and that’s pretty crazy. But imagine how crazy it seems to the guys in These Charming Men, the tribute band that performed both nights of the convention (Saturday night was mostly Smiths songs; Sunday was mainly solo Moz). These Charming Men are from

Dublin, and this is the second year they've made the trip to Hollywood. When they arrived in 2001, they expected to see the same faces that populate the pubs they play in the U.K. What they didn't anticipate was an audience of East L.A. homeboys who mosh when they hear the opening chords of the gingerly raucous "You're Gonna Need Someone on Your Side."

"It was quite shocking when we first came here," recalls vocalist Richard Cullen, his accent thicker than his hair. "My theory is that they picked up on the fashion sense and the visual elements of rockabilly music. And you know, Morrissey is something of an exile, just like a lot of them. I think perhaps they feel like they're living in the present tense with this mysterious character who's just down the road in his mansion."

The performances by These Charming Men were clearly the linchpin of the 2002 convention, and Cullen's attention to detail is remarkable; he's a good singer and a great actor. The band played for two hours each night, expending more energy than Morrissey himself has offered in years. Fans were expected to rush onstage and hug Cullen while he pretended to ignore them, a simulation of every Morrissey concert since the dawn of time. It's very postmodern: the audience becomes a "tribute audience," earnestly simulating hyperkinetic adoration while the band earnestly simulates *Meat Is Murder*.

But not everyone gets what they want.

Mark Hensley Jr. and Flore Barbu refuse to watch These Charming Men, a seemingly odd decision when you consider they each paid thirty dollars to attend a convention where that band was performing twice. These are the prototypical "weird white kids": Hensley appears to be auditioning for Bud Cort's role in a remake of *Harold and Maude*, and Barbu seems like the kind of woman who thinks Sylvia Plath was an underrated humorist. Both are wearing neckties for no apparent reason. These are the people you remember as being Smiths fans. And heaven knows they're miserable now.

"I don't think a true Morrissey fan would want to see a Morrissey cover band," Barbu says without a hint of inflection. "Morrissey would be depressed if he showed up here. He'd cry for a week. Have you seen those people around here wearing T-shirts that say 'Got Morrissey?' instead of 'Got Milk?' It's ridiculous. Morrissey would hate this."

It's obvious that Barbu and Hensley are smart, and they're endlessly, hopelessly sarcastic. There was a time when they would have embodied

everything Morrissey seemed to represent. But Moz didn't hang on to his friends. He found new ones who liked him more. It's not that Barbu and Hensley feel their subculture has wound up in the wrong hands; it's just that these neo-Mozzers are too enthusiastic to be properly dour.

"People have actually said to me, 'You like Morrissey? That's weird for a white guy.' And I find that completely bizarre," Hensley tells me, momentarily dropping his veil of irony for a grain of semi-sincere annoyance. "Most of the other people here wouldn't even know who Jarvis Cocker is. They only like Morrissey. We just came here to make fun of people."

But perhaps that joke isn't funny anymore.

1. Morrissey finally released a new album in 2004 (*You Are the Quarry*), and it was generally well received by critics. He also started doing press again, but it had almost no impact on the commercial success of the record. It seems that the people who remain interested in Morrissey don't really care if he talks about himself or not.

[2](#). Diaz's point about "Girlfriend in a Coma" is—in a technical sense—true. Of course, it should be noted that this is a song where the protagonist looks at his comatose acquaintance and reminisces about all the times he considered murdering her. It may also be less than coincidental that *Girlfriend in a Coma* is also the name of a novel by author Douglas Coupland, who publicly announced he was gay in 2005.

FITTER, HAPPIER

Radiohead was the smartest collection of musicians I've ever interviewed, and I have no idea what band would rank second. I do know it wouldn't be that close. All they wanted to talk about were books. The dumbest guy in Radiohead is still smarter (by himself) than all three members of the Beastie Boys and two-fifths of the Strokes.

When I was flying to Oxford, England, for this story, I read Naomi Klein's five-hundred-page manifesto *No Logo*. I was a little afraid that Thom Yorke might want to talk about Canadian anticorporate ideology for the totality of our interview. As it turns out, he never mentioned it once. However, I must have discussed this subject with Colin Greenwood, even though I don't remember doing so. The reason I assume we must have talked about Naomi Klein is because I opened up *No Logo* when I was putting this anthology together, and there was a rudimentary map inside: during dinner, Colin had sketched me a map of downtown Oxford so that I could find a farmers' market that sold lychee tea.

Finding this map makes me optimistic. I have interviewed so many rock stars who turned out to be pricks and/or morons; it was refreshing to meet a band who actually turned out to be cooler than I anticipated. There have been countless occasions when I've listened to a song and imagined what its words and sounds were supposed to represent, and I inevitably perceive each element to be complex and subtle and conscious. However, when the songwriter eventually explains his thought process during the music's creation, I often realize that (a) the musician barely cares what the song is supposed to mean, and that (b) I've actually invested more intellectual energy into the song than the goddamn artist. Which is fine, I suppose; I mean, my favorite band is KISS, so there are certainly some self-created holes within my argument. But it was still satisfying to discover that Radiohead's music seems smart *on purpose*.

NO MORE KNIVES

(JULY 2003)

Meeting Thom is easy.

Everyone will tell you it's not, and they're all wrong. There are people who will insist Thom Yorke is a misanthropic sociopath, and that he ends interviews for no good reason. They will suggest that the likelihood of him speaking candidly is roughly the same as the chance of him unscrewing two bolts from his neck and removing his cybernetic faceplate, suddenly revealing a titanium endoskeleton that was built by futuristic space druids.

But this is not true.

Thom Yorke is weird, sort of. But you've met weirder. He's mostly just an intense, five-foot-five-inch thirty-four-year-old who wears hooded sweatshirts with sleeves too long for his limbs, and this makes him look like a nervous kindergartener. He doesn't appear to have combed his hair since *The Bends* came out in 1995, and his beard looks "undecided," if that's possible. But here's the bottom line: he's pleasant. Not exactly gregarious, but polite. He is neither mechanical nor messianic. And this is what everyone seems to miss about him, and about Radiohead as a whole: they may make transcendent, fragile, pre-apocalyptic math rock for a generation of forward-thinking fans, but they're still just a bunch of dudes.

I'm sitting with Yorke in the restaurant of an Oxford, England, hotel called the Old Parsonage. He was twenty minutes late for our interview, explaining that he had to run home and do some yoga because he was "feeling a bit weird." He's studying the restaurant menu and complaining that he's running out of things he can eat—not only is he a vegetarian, but he's stopped eating anything made with wheat (for the past six months, he's had a skin rash, and he thinks wheat is the culprit). Eventually he settles on roasted tomatoes and butter beans, a meal he calls "expensive" (it costs about seventeen dollars). We're talking about politics (kind of) and his two-year-old son Noah (sort of), and I ask him how those two subjects dovetail—in other words, how becoming a father has changed his political beliefs and how that has affected the songwriting on *Hail to the Thief*, the sixth studio album from earth's most relevant rock band.

His answer starts predictably. But it ends quickly.

"Having a son has made me very concerned about the future and about how things in the world are being steered, supposedly in my name," he says between sips of mineral water. "I wonder if our children will even have a future. But the trouble with your question—and we both know this—is that if I discuss the details of what I'm referring to in *SPIN* magazine, I will get death threats. And I'm frankly not willing to get death threats, because I

value my life and my family's safety. And that sort of sucks, I realize, but I know what is going on out there."

Yorke's reluctance is not a surprise. Since April, Radiohead have stressed that *Hail to the Thief* is not a political record and that the album's title is not a reference to George W. Bush's controversial victory over Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election (in fact, Yorke claims he heard the phrase during a radio program analyzing the election of 1888). This is a bit paradoxical, because that argument seems both valid and impossible: there are no overtly political lyrics on the record, but it *feels* political. And Yorke is not exactly nonpartisan: at a recent antiwar rally in Gloucestershire, England, he publicly declared that "the U.S. is being run by religious maniac bigots that stole the election."

So what are we to make of this?

"If the motivation for naming our album had been based solely on the U.S. election, I'd find that to be pretty shallow," he says. "To me, it's about forces that aren't necessarily human, forces that are creating this climate of fear. While making this record, I became obsessed with how certain people are able to inflict incredible pain on others while believing they're doing the right thing. They're taking people's souls from them before they're even dead. My girlfriend—she's a Dante expert—told me that was Dante's theory about authority. I was just overcome with all this fear and darkness. And that fear is the 'thief.'"

Well, okay, maybe labeling Yorke a "normal dude" might be something of an exaggeration. Perhaps he is a tad paranoid. But he's no paranoid android; he's just a paranoid humanoid, and he certainly has a sense of humor about it. After he casually mentions his girlfriend, I ask him if he'll ever get married.

"That's a totally personal question—next," he says gruffly, and for a moment it feels like I'm watching an outtake from Radiohead's 1999 documentary, the mediaphobic *Meeting People Is Easy*. But then I laugh. And he laughs. And suddenly he's just a bearded humanoid who's eating tomatoes, completely aware of how ridiculous our conversation is. "What is this?" he asks. "Do you work for *Us Weekly* now?"

Most of what you believe about Radiohead is wrong.

"The first time I ever saw Thom, he was jumping over a car." This is not something I expected Radiohead guitarist Ed O'Brien to say, but he appears

quite serious. “Thom was an amazing gymnast in high school,” he continues. “Nobody knows that about him, but you can get a sense of it just by watching him move around. He’s really strong. He did this handspring right over a car. It’s like how Morrissey was a great long-distance runner in high school—nobody knows that, either.”

O’Brien is the fifth member of the band I have spoken with over the past eight hours, each in a different room of the Old Parsonage. I’ve been rushing from room to room for answers, not unlike the final ten minutes in a game of Clue. O’Brien is the last person I’m speaking with today, and he’s different from the other four guys in the band: he’s significantly taller (six feet five), he’s the only one who doesn’t reside in Radiohead’s native city of Oxford (he lives an hour away in London), and he talks like an intelligent hippie (if such a creature exists). He’s also rumored to be the most “rock-oriented” member of Radiohead, preferring the conventional structures of older songs, like “Ripcord” and “Just.”

Here, again, my assumption is wrong.

“Do people really think I like straight-ahead rock?” he asks when I bring this up. “There is an irony in that, because I’ve always been more interested in making sounds, which is why I tend to gravitate toward *Kid A* material. If I ever made a solo record—and I have no plans to do that, but if I did—it would be all ethereal music. I like to smoke. I like a toke or two. So I like music in that vein.”

Part of the reason O’Brien is perceived as Radiohead’s designated rocker is that he’s the most interested in classic rock; he especially enjoys discussing U2, who appear to be Radiohead’s third-biggest musical influence (the first two being the Smiths, whom all five members love unequivocally, and the Pixies, from whose records Jonny Greenwood learned how to play guitar). For the most part, the other four members don’t talk about mainstream rock.

“I’m interested in bands as beasts,” O’Brien says. “I’m interested in U2 and the Rolling Stones and Neil Young and Crazy Horse. I love the dynamic of musicians working together and all the voodoo shit that comes with it. It’s a complicated thing to do over the expanse of time, which is why I respect U2 so much. Don’t get me wrong—I adore the Stones, but they haven’t made a good record since 1972. *Exile on Main Street* was the last great Stones album.¹ But U2 have been at it for twenty years, and that

song ‘Stuck in a Moment You Can’t Get Out Of’ was amazing. And that’s after twenty years. That’s when the Stones were making *Still Life*.”

It’s intriguing to hear O’Brien discuss band dynamics, because Radiohead rarely discuss the internal mechanics of their organization; their dynamic is relatively unknown. The band members tend to describe the creative process as their “methodology,” and here’s how it works: Yorke writes the material alone (usually on piano) and gives demo CDs to the other four. They all listen for a few weeks and deduce what they can contribute; they then meet, rehearse, and arrange the songs as a unit (according to Jonny, arrangement is their favorite step). They perform the songs live (in order to see what works and what doesn’t), and then they go into the studio to record them.

With *Hail to the Thief*, the recording process was intentionally short. Most of the record was cut in two and a half weeks in Los Angeles with longtime producer Nigel Godrich, often one song per day (supposedly, the very first sound you hear on the album is Jonny plugging in his guitar on the initial morning they arrived at the studio). What’s surprising is how conciliatory the other four band members are to Yorke. They’re all accomplished musicians, but he directs the vision of the band. And this seems to cause no problem whatsoever.

“In a band like the Smashing Pumpkins, that kind of song-writing situation caused problems, because one gets the impression certain members of that band felt replaceable,” O’Brien says. “But if you feel good about yourself, you will be honest and generous toward other people. I hope Thom makes a solo album in the future; there’s no doubt he will.² And it will be fucking amazing. But as a band, we are all individually essential. In Radiohead, no one is replaceable.”

Obviously, this is the kind of hyper-democratic statement all bands make, but it seems slightly more genuine with Radiohead. Due to the layered complexity of their soundscapes—almost nothing is verse-chorus-verse, guitar riff—bass line—drum beat—collaboration and cross-pollination are unavoidable. It appears that Jonny’s musical contribution continues to expand; for example, he wrote all of the song “A Wolf at the Door” (Yorke just added the words). At thirty-one, he’s the youngest member of Radiohead, and he also may be the most cognitively musical. He likes to talk about details.

“For every song like ‘I Will,’ which arrived fully formed and was immediately perfect, there are songs like ‘Sail to the Moon,’ which weren’t great,” Jonny says. “I’m not being rude, but ‘Sail to the Moon’ wasn’t very well written, and it had different chords and only half an idea. It only came together after the whole band worked on it and figured out how the structures should be, and [drummer] Phil [Selway] had some insight on how the song could be arranged. And then it became just about the best song on the record.”

In a way, it all sounds remarkably simple, but things weren’t always this easy. O’Brien says *Hail to the Thief* represents “the end of an era” and that they’ve taken “this kind of music” (however you want to define it) as far as it can go. But that statement seems more reflective of their new outlook on life, which is that being in this band is an exceptional—and relatively painless—experience. They like being Radiohead.

Six years ago, they did not.

“The worst point [in our career] was playing shows in the U.K. right after *OK Computer* came out,” says bassist Colin Greenwood, Jonny’s older brother. “There is nothing worse than having to play in front of twenty thousand people when someone—when Thom—absolutely does not want to be there, and you can see that hundred-yard stare in his eyes. You hate having to put your friend through that experience. You find yourself wondering how you got there.”

Colin is saying this as he eats in the hotel’s parlor room. It’s the second of four meals he will consume today (he claims nervousness over *Hail to the Thief* has raised his metabolism). Colin is both the band’s friendliest and goofiest member and just about the most enthusiastic person I have ever met. Sometimes he closes his eyes for twenty seconds at a time, almost as if the world is too brilliant to look at; there appears to be no subject he is not obsessed with. He tells me I must visit the Oxford University Museum of Natural History to see the stuffed dodo birds (which I do) and insists I check out a cartography exhibit at the Bodleian Library (which I do not). He gleefully mentions having seen a baby deer while driving to the *SPIN* photo shoot, as if it had been some rare sighting of the Loch Ness monster. He mentions about fifteen different books during our interview and even gives me one as a present (Brian Thompson’s *Imperial Vanities*). Everyone in this band probably reads more than you do; hanging out with Radio-head

is kind of like getting high with a bunch of librarians. At one point, I ask Colin (who is married to American writer and literary critic Molly McGrann) a theoretical question: If the music of Radiohead were a work of literature, would it be fiction or nonfiction?

“I think it would be nonfiction,” he says. “Thom’s lyrics are sort of like a running commentary on what’s happening in the world, almost like you’re looking out of the window of a Japanese bullet train and things are sort of flying by. It’s like a shutter snapping in succession.”

That’s an apt description of the lyrics on *Hail to the Thief*, particularly on less abstract tracks like “A Punch-up at a Wedding” (a narrative about the clichéd reactions to a social faux pas), “We Suck Young Blood” (which examines the vapidness of celebrity), and “Myxomatosis,” perhaps the most interesting entry on *Hail to the Thief*. Myxomatosis is a virus that inadvertently devastated the British rabbit population after it was introduced in the 1950s, covering the countryside with bunny carcasses. The disease is not what the song is literally about,³ but hearing Yorke’s explanation illustrates why trying to dissect the metaphors in Radiohead’s music is virtually impossible. The dots do not connect.

“I remember my parents pointing out all these dead rabbits on the road when I was a kid,” Yorke says. “I didn’t know that much about the virus, or even how to spell it. But I loved the word. I loved the way it sounded. The song is actually about mind control. I’m sure you’ve experienced situations where you’ve had your ideas edited or rewritten when they didn’t conveniently fit into somebody else’s agenda. And then—when someone asks you about those ideas later—you can’t even argue with them, because now your idea exists in that edited form.

“It’s hard to remember how things actually happen anymore, because there’s so much mind control and so many media agendas,” he continues. “There’s a line in that song that goes, ‘My thoughts are misguided and a little naïve.’ That’s the snarly look you get from an expert when they accuse you of being a conspiracy theorist. In America, they still use the ‘conspiracy theorist’ accusation as the ultimate condemnation. I’ve been reading this Gore Vidal book [*Dreaming War*], and I know Vidal is always accused of being a conspiracy theorist. But the evidence he uses is very similar to the evidence used by a lot of well-respected British historians. Yet they still call him crazy. To me, that’s part of what ‘Myxomatosis’ is about

—it’s about wishing that all the people who tell you that you’re crazy were actually right. That would make life so much easier.”

This self-analysis is noteworthy, because it speaks to where Yorke is coming from intellectually. However, it avoids one trenchant question: What does mind control have to do with a virus that kills rabbits?

The answer is “nothing.”

Yorke named the track “Myxomatosis” for the same reason he repeats the phrase “the rain drops” forty-six times during the song “Sit Down. Stand Up.” He simply liked the way it sounded on tape. The syllables fall like dominoes, and the consonance collapses like a house of cards. Sometimes you can’t find the meaning behind a metaphor because *there is no metaphor*.

Yorke’s preoccupation with picking words for how they sound (as opposed to what they mean) is part of why Radiohead’s cultic following cuts such a wide swath (every album except 2001’s *Amnesiac* has gone platinum): if phrases have no clarity and no hard reality, people can turn them into whatever they need. If you need the words on *Hail to the Thief* to be political, they certainly have that potential; if you need *Hail to the Thief* to explain why your girlfriend doesn’t love you, it can do that, too. It’s a songwriting style Yorke borrowed from Michael Stipe; not coincidentally, Stipe’s R.E.M. were the last rock intellectuals taken as seriously as Radiohead are taken today.

“What I love about them,” says Stipe, calling from a recording studio in Vancouver, “is that Radiohead’s music allows me to craft my own film inside my head. That’s what I like about all music.”

Stipe⁴ and Yorke’s relationship is hard to quantify, as it’s always difficult for *über*-famous rock musicians on different continents to have any kind of conventional friendship (since traveling together on R.E.M.’s 1995 *Monster* tour, they’ve maintained a sporadic phone and e-mail dialogue). However, this much is clear: the guidance Stipe provided Yorke at the height of Radiohead’s fame almost certainly kept the band from breaking up. To hear Stipe explain it, their interaction was almost academic—he talks about the complexity of “dealing with words” and how all performers “are missing something in their DNA” and that it’s almost impossible for artists to balance their inherent insecurity with the ego required to display oneself in public.

Yorke’s description is considerably simpler.

“The nicest thing Michael did for me was pull me out of a hole I would have never escaped from otherwise,” Yorke says. “This was right after *OK Computer* came out. All he really did was listen to me talk about the experience I was going through, but there’s not a whole lot of people who can relate to that kind of situation, you know? That was very nice of him. I would like to pull a few other people out of holes at some point.”

I tell Yorke he should consider contacting White Stripes frontman Jack White about this, but he says, “I don’t think he needs my help.” This is another of Yorke’s quirks: he tends to assume that everybody on earth has their life more together than he does. Sometimes he puts his hands on the sides of his skull and inadvertently replicates the figure in Edvard Munch’s painting *The Scream*. Conversationally, he seems completely rational and calm, but he’s convinced he’s losing his mind, and that this is probably Bill O’Reilly’s fault.

“I absolutely feel crazy at times,” he says. “Anybody who turns on the TV and actually thinks about what they’re watching has to believe they’re going insane or that they’re missing something everyone else is seeing. When I watch the Fox News channel, I can’t believe how much nerve those people have and how they assume that people are just going to swallow that shit. And I find myself thinking that *I must be missing something*.”

This is who *Hail to the Thief* is ultimately for, I think—people who look for order in the world and simply don’t see it. Colin thinks much of the album is about the destruction of human space by corporate forces (he draws thematic comparisons between *Hail to the Thief* and Jonathan Franzen’s essay collection *How to Be Alone*); Jonny thinks it might be about accepting the condition of the world and concentrating on one’s own family; Selway talks of “dark forces” that drove the record’s creation; O’Brien casually wonders if “it might be too late for this planet.” (Part of Radiohead’s enduring mystery might be that even the other guys in the band don’t fully understand what Yorke’s lyrics are trying to convey.) Yet the songs are all about the same thing, really: learning how to understand a new kind of world. And while this isn’t always simple, it’s not necessarily depressing. In fact, it might be why Yorke still claims that *Hail to the Thief* is a record “for shagging,” which is what he told the press months before the record was released. Apparently, we’re all supposed to listen to “Myxomatosis” and get laid.

“I think this is a sexy record,” Yorke says, and there is at least a 50 percent chance that he’s serious. “The rhythms are very sexy. It’s where the beats fall. It has its own sexy pulse.”

Hoping for clarification, I ask him to name the sexiest record he owns.

“That’s a good question,” he says. “Public Enemy was pretty sexy. ‘911 Is a Joke’ was a sexy song.”

And I find myself thinking, *I must be missing something.*

- [1.](#) O'Brien apparently doesn't like 1978's *Some Girls*, which is crazy.

[2](#). This would be 2006's *Eraser*. It's interesting to note that even though the other members of Radiohead don't necessarily understand Yorke, they're remarkably good at speculating about his behavior.

3. Unfortunately.

[4](#). Here's a detail about Michael Stipe I couldn't jam into the article, mostly because I thought the sentiment would be distracting: when we spoke on the phone, my first question was directly about Yorke's cultural position, and Stipe said, "Well, Thom has entered that rarefied class of songwriter—these are people like Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and myself. The things he says now take on a different kind of significance." This, I suppose, is completely true—but what a fucked-up thing to say about oneself! Were those the only three people he could think of?

THE AMERICAN RADIOHEAD

This story created an interesting problem, and I don't think I ever truly resolved it. I interviewed Wilco's Jeff Tweedy on a Friday afternoon, and it went extraordinarily well. I went back to New York the following week and wrote the piece for *SPIN*. And then—a few days after I gave the story to my editor—we found out that Tweedy had entered rehab the day after I spoke with him. Obviously, that complicated things, because I wasn't sure how much this revelation impacted the story. You could argue that it changed absolutely everything, or you could argue that it changed nothing. I ultimately reinterviewed Tweedy over the phone and added about four hundred words for contextual purposes, but I still wonder if I should have traveled back to Chicago and rereported the entire thing.

There were two things that didn't make the story (and which I later wrote about in an essay for *Minneapolis City Pages*). At one point, Tweedy and I were standing in the pantry of his home in northwest Chicago (he was looking for his stocking cap), and he started talking about how his eight-year-old son was the drummer in a grade-school rock band that played Jet songs. Now, nearly everybody I know thinks Jet is ridiculous; they've become the band hipsters are legally required to hate. So I made some joke (and I have no idea why) about how Jet was terrible and that it was somehow predictable that the only people who would want to cover Jet songs would be second graders. Tweedy didn't understand why I would say something like that. He looked at me like I had just made fun of a quadriplegic and asked, "Well, don't you like rock music?" And then I felt stupid, because I realized that (a) Jet plays rock music, and that (b) I like rock music, and that (c) *I actually liked Jet*, both tangibly and intangibly. So that was something I realized about Jeff Tweedy: musically, he remembers what is obvious.

After about five minutes, Jeff Tweedy found his stocking cap. We got into his car and started driving to the studio where Wilco makes music (we were listening to demos of the song "Humming-bird," as I recall, and the demos were—oddly—on cassette). We were waiting at a red light, and I asked him if there would ever be an Uncle Tupelo reunion with Jay Farrar. Surprisingly (and without much hesitation), he said, "Maybe." This shocked me, because Tweedy hasn't really spoken with Farrar in roughly ten years. I

asked him what would be the biggest hurdle in making this reunion a reality. He said something I could never have anticipated: “I don’t know if I could play those songs anymore,” Tweedy said. “The bass parts on some of those songs are really fast. I don’t think I can play bass that fast anymore.” This, obviously, is crazy; this is like saying you’re considering reuniting with your estranged wife after a ten-year separation, and you’re mostly nervous that she might have rearranged the living room furniture. Yet—somehow—this sentiment struck me as remarkably insightful; it was the kind of highly important detail that normal people never consider when they expect artists to unconditionally satisfy their dreams. So this was the other thing I realized about Jeff Tweedy: musically, he notices what is not so obvious.

GHOST STORY

(JULY 2004)

Jeff Tweedy didn’t vomit today. He vomited yesterday, but not today.

We are on the second floor of Tweedy’s home in northwest Chicago, a pale green residence that could just as easily be owned by an employee for the Illinois Highway Department. There is a sign in the bathroom that reminds me to brush my teeth. Tweedy is lying on a bed designed for a child, thinking about smoking an American Spirit cigarette and quite possibly having a panic attack. His four-year-old son Sam is running around the house completely naked, incessantly repeating the phrase “Thank you!” while he sprints from room to room. Tweedy’s eight-year-old son Spencer is playing drums in the basement, and he’s remarkably advanced; he’s already in a band called the Blisters, fronted by a fifth-grade vocalist (they cover Jet songs). Tweedy’s wife Sue keeps apologizing because the house is overrun with teacups and plastic soldiers; Tweedy can’t remember if his wife’s name is spelled “Suzy” or “Susie,” so he begs me to refer to her simply as “Sue” if I mention her in this article (apparently, he’s gotten in trouble for this before). At the moment, I can’t tell if Jeff Tweedy is completely relaxed or desperately nervous, because he always seems to act exactly the same; it’s just that he tends to puke more than most frontmen.

“Here’s the scoop—I’m nuts,” Tweedy says. He smiles, but he does not laugh. “I need to get on the first floor, I think, or maybe we should go outside. Have you ever swam out into the ocean and suddenly realized

you've gone too far out? Sometimes being outside feels like the shore to me. It's hard to explain. It's sort of like getting so high that you're afraid you'll never be able to get back inside your body and you'll never be normal again, except I'm obviously not high right now."

Retrospectively, Tweedy's last statement might raise a few eyebrows. This conversation is happening on Friday afternoon, March 26. Tomorrow night, Jeff Tweedy will have a major panic attack that will necessitate a trip to the emergency room, and then he'll have another major attack on Sunday. He will subsequently check into a dual-diagnosis rehabilitation clinic that will simultaneously treat him for an addiction to painkillers and a mental illness that causes monolithic migraine headaches and uncontrollable nervousness. It's all a bit confusing, because Tweedy isn't lying when he says he's not high; in fact, he hasn't taken any painkillers in the five weeks prior to this interview, even though he's still addicted to Vicodin. That's part of the reason he'll end up in the hospital tomorrow night.

But these are all things I won't learn for a month.

Amidst the chill of early spring, things still seem normal. Tweedy is wearing an unwashed Godzilla T-shirt and sarcastically compares himself to Dave Pirner. We go into his backyard, and it's a Tonka Toy graveyard. Our ostensible intention is to discuss the new Wilco album *A Ghost Is Born*, which we did do ... but only for twenty minutes. The other two hours of the conversation mostly dwell on "the nature of art," which undoubtedly sounds like pretentious bullshit. And I'm sure it would have been were it not for the fact that Tweedy is probably the least pretentious semi-genius I've ever interviewed.

"It's just that I'm uncool," Tweedy says when asked about the overt normalcy of his middle-class life. "I have a great life, but it's an uncool life. It was a wonderful revelation to move to Chicago and make music and just be normal. So many artists reach a certain level of success, and then they cross over; they surrender everything to the service of their persona. Take somebody like Madonna, for example: you could never get to be that huge unless you surrendered every other impulse in your body to the service of your persona. Even with Bob Dylan, there was clearly a point early in his career where he was completely able to immerse himself inside that persona. And I think it's disastrous that so many people destroy themselves because they can't do it. They don't have the intestinal fortitude. I mean, how many fucking people has Keith Richards killed? How many countless

people has Sid Vicious killed? How many young girls has Madonna made insane?”

This probably sounds like the kind of sentiment you’d hear from a graying thirty-six-year-old father who hasn’t had a drink in thirteen years, drives a minivan, and exists in a state of omnipresent nervousness. And it should, because that’s who Tweedy is.

The story of Wilco—and the arc of Tweedy’s career—is ultimately a story of sonic expansion, a fact that’s too often lost on people; almost every Wilco album arrives with a minicontroversy that overshadows everything else (and obviously, that’s going to happen with this album, too). It began with the breakup of Uncle Tupelo, the St. Louis band Tweedy formed with lifelong friend Jay Farrar in 1987. Though Tupelo did not invent alternative country, they legitimized it as a culturally consequential genre. When Uncle Tupelo ended acrimoniously in ’93, Farrar formed Son Volt while Tweedy absorbed the other members of Tupelo and started Wilco, a band whose first record (*A.M.*) sounded similar to their previous work. In 1996, Wilco released *Being There*, a double album that opened the band’s sonic parameters; 1999’s *Summerteeth* was essentially a pop album that had almost no connection to alt country whatsoever.

It was 2002’s *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, however, that radically changed the public perception of Wilco and turned them into the Midwestern equivalent of Radiohead. The story of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* has been told so many times (and in so many publications) that it hardly seems worth covering again, but here’s the short version: upon their delivery of *YHF*, Wilco was dropped from Reprise Records (an imprint owned by Warner Bros.) for making an album that was too “inaccessible,” only to resell the same material to Nonesuch Records (an imprint *also* owned by Warner Bros.). The record eventually sold 400,000 copies and turned Wilco into critically adored iconoclasts with enough integrity to flatten a Clydesdale. This paradox was illustrated in the documentary film *I Am Trying to Break Your Heart*. However, that movie also unveiled the rift that prompted guitarist Jay Bennett to exit Wilco upon *YHF*’s completion, and certain scenes implied that his departure was due to a power struggle with Tweedy. This is a perception Tweedy still finds irritating, since it seems to keep happening to him: in Uncle Tupelo, everyone thought Farrar was the dour John

Lennon character and Tweedy was the less substantial Paul McCartney; in Wilco, Tweedy was cast into the exact opposite relationship with Bennett.

“That is not something I haven’t noticed,” Tweedy says. “Every time I make a record that goes in a different direction, people seem to assume that whatever was good about the previous record must have been the work of The Other Guy. This happens on every record I make, and it’s not something that’s directed at Wilco as a band—it seems specific to me. In Uncle Tupelo, I was supposedly the pop lightweight. But then in Wilco, everyone seemed to think that somebody else must have brought the pop sensibility in.”

According to every member of the band, *A Ghost Is Born* was a collaborative effort that reflects a growing interest in explorative music, heavily influenced by the kraut rock sensibilities of drummer Glenn Kotche and new keyboardist/technophile Mikael Jorgensen. “Less Than You Think” is a fifteen-minute track with twelve minutes of nonmelodic drone. The guitar sound on “At Least That’s What You Said” is strikingly similar to Neil Young and Crazy Horse. There’s also a ten-minute song called “Spiders (Kidsmoke)” that sounds like the fusion of two songs, and it’s preceded by a track called “Hell Is Chrome” that appears to address the existential issue of being trapped by perfection.

Then again, I might be totally wrong about this.

CK: This might seem like a weird question, but do you like Bob Seger?

Jeff Tweedy: What?

CK: I think “Spiders (Kidsmoke)” sounds like a Kraftwerk song that evolves into a Bob Seger song.¹

Jeff Tweedy: Well, I’m not a big Bob Seger fan. I don’t hate him. He’s written some amazing songs, and he’s written some amazingly terrible songs. I mean, who would admit they like Bob Seger now that “Like a Rock” is in your face every fucking second of the day? But stuff like “Turn the Page” and “Mainstreet” were great. And you know, now that I think about it, the guitar sound on “Mainstreet” is actually pretty close to the guitar sound on “Hell Is Chrome.” So maybe you’ve uncovered something. Maybe I actually love Bob Seger.

CK: Is “Hell Is Chrome” about the value of disorder?

Jeff Tweedy: I think so.

CK: Are you just trying to be agreeable right now?

Jeff Tweedy: I don't know. Maybe "Hell Is Chrome" is about wanting the inverse. It's hellish for me to so badly want order in a world where you can't have it. My impulse when I write is an almost obsessive-compulsive desire for order. It almost hurts.

Here again, Tweedy describes himself with words that don't fit his behavior; he portrays himself as a man who is losing his mind, but he seems completely calm and rational as he does so. Apparently, this comes from years of practice.

"I really don't know how bad his panic attacks are," says bassist John Stirratt, one of the original members of Uncle Tupelo and the only current member of Wilco who knew Tweedy before he quit drinking at the age of twenty-three. "It's varied over the years that I've known him, but the migraines have definitely gotten worse in the latter years. I mean, he was always wound up in a way, but I can't say I really understand it."

It's possible that Stirratt doesn't understand it because Tweedy is reticent to explain anything that suggests he is struggling. It seems like he *wants* to talk about these things, but he usually stops himself; he's afraid it will make him seem like a clichéd rock narcissist.

"I have always been rigid in my hatred of the stereotype of the debauched, tortured artist," Tweedy says. "In fact, I might have actively tried to subvert that idea [in the past], because it turned me off so many times when I was young. And it's not like I'm saying everyone should live a clean life, because I've done drugs and all that. I have no problem with those things. It's just that I felt—like most teenagers—that I had real pain in my life, and I kept reading interviews from artists I loved who proceeded to say things that simultaneously diminished what they did and how I felt. I hate the idea that artists suffer more than anyone else. They're just in a different position."

People who like Wilco tend to be interested in musical details, and these are the key details for *A Ghost Is Born*: it was produced by the mercurial Jim O'Rourke, who also contributed some instrumental parts. When Wilco plays live, many of those guitar parts will be played by jazz-o-centric Nels Cline (best known for his work with the group Quartet Music), who will

tour as a fifth member of Wilco. Several songs on *A Ghost Is Born* were created through a process the band called “fundamentals,” where Tweedy autonomously played an acoustic guitar and sang random lyrics while the other members listened to him in a different room; the other band members would then perform along with Tweedy for thirty straight minutes (in other words, the band could hear Tweedy, but Tweedy couldn’t hear them). These half-hour sessions were all burned onto CDs, and Tweedy would listen to the discs at home and mine individual songs from the jam session.

The rest of my April interview with Tweedy was, for lack of a better term, affable. He doesn’t *seem* addicted to anything except nicotine. His day-to-day life sounds ideal: he wakes up late, reads for a few hours, picks up his kids from school and plays with them for a few hours, takes a late nap, and then drives to the Wilco band loft and works on music deep into the night. There is always a sense of longing in Wilco’s music, and that same feeling resonates in Tweedy’s dialogue; he will admit that it makes him sad that Farrar claims to not even listen to the music he makes. “I found an interview with Jay where he said he’s never heard any Wilco, and I was really disappointed. I always check out his stuff. There might have even been a time after Uncle Tupelo broke up—when I was making *Being There*, definitely—when I was still thinking about [Farrar] in the process of making the album. I mean, when I was in Uncle Tupelo, I wanted to write songs that knocked Jay out. And I wanted him to think Wilco was fucking rocking, you know?”

We talk about God for a bit, partially because there’s a track on the new record called “Theologians” that outlines Tweedy’s disdain for dogmatic religion. We also talk about politics, mostly because Tweedy has never felt more political than he does right now. (“I’m almost scared to say this,” he says at one point, “but I’m really starting to believe George W. Bush wants to experience the Rapture in his lifetime.”) However, the most telling thing Tweedy says probably comes when I ask him a few minor details about the lyrics to “Heavy Metal Drummer,” the second-best song off *Yankee Hotel Fox-trot*. What he tells me illustrates more about his personality than anything someone else could deduce from his songs.

“People always get confused about ‘Heavy Metal Drummer,’ because they think I was the drummer in a band that covered KISS songs. That’s not what it’s about. I can tell you what it’s about. Hopefully, it won’t ruin it for you.” For the first time, Tweedy becomes almost goofy, gesturing with a

cigarette lodged in his right paw; this is clearly a story he enjoys telling. “That song is really just another reminder about not being judgmental and reductive. There were many, many nights in St. Louis where me and my friends would go see some punk band at the cool punk club, and then we’d all go to the landing on the Mississippi River, because the bars on the landing had a four A.M. liquor license. And all us punk guys would sit there and scoff and feel superior to all the heavy-metal bar bands with the big hair and the spandex, most of whom were having the fucking time of their fucking life. So who was losing? Me. I was. Those guys were getting laid, they were deluding themselves into thinking they were gonna be huge stars, and they were living. And I was dead. I was staring into my drink.”

He laughs.

“I don’t think we’ll play that song anymore.”

A few hours later, we said good-bye, and I went home.

Exactly one month later, Tweedy calls me on the telephone. He has just spent two twelve-day stints in an unnamed Chicago clinic (after the first twelve days he still felt twinges of panic, so he readmitted himself for another twelve). I ask him how he is doing, and I mention that many of the things he said to me thirty-one days ago have now taken on a different context. He is not surprised.

“I’m doing better,” he says. “Considering the whole rock-star cliché of going into rehab, I can see how my actions might seem contradictory to how I presented myself when we last spoke. But the fact of the matter is that I really didn’t represent myself in any way that wasn’t true.”

In short, this is what happened: Tweedy was prescribed Vicodin for his migraines. The pills helped; in fact, they helped too much. Sometimes he would swallow ten in one day. In February, he decided to stop taking them, because he felt they were becoming a problem. But he also decided to stop taking *all* his medication, including the pills that are supposed to control his panic episodes. This is a drug called benzodiazepine.² After a few weeks, he went back on the benzodiazepine, but now it was too late; it no longer stopped him from having attacks. This is when everything escalated.

“I stopped taking everything else when I stopped taking the painkiller,” he says. “I just became phobic about all medicine. But when I went back on the panic medication, it was too late. I was actually detoxing off the panic medication in rehab, because it’s really dangerous to detox off

benzodiazepine too quickly; you can have seizures. When I went into the emergency room on that Saturday, I thought I was dying. But I needed to go to rehab for the Vicodin, too. I needed to understand how addiction and mental illness were interrelated, because I had never really put those two things together.”

That might be the strangest aspect of Tweedy’s time in rehab: at least from his own description of the events, it sounds like he was dealing with mental illness more than he was dealing with a drug problem. He now calls rehab “the greatest experience of [his] life” and wishes he had heard about dual-diagnosis facilities years ago.

“I always thought I was different,” Tweedy says, which is the kind of thing people who get out of rehab always seem to say. “I could always quit other things I had experimented with, and I wasn’t pursuing oblivion. I never wanted to get fucked up, and I don’t like being fucked up. It wasn’t like I was taking Vicodin to party.”

That’s the kind of rock star Tweedy is, I guess: he takes drugs, but not to party; he vomits, but not from drinking; he goes to rehab, but he ends up liking it. If every band was like Wilco, rock music would be a whole lot stranger.

1. This was not actually **my** thought; my editor at *SPIN*, Jon Dolan, mentioned this connection to me the very first time we heard *A Ghost Is Born*. I thought, *You know, that's completely accurate*. Two weeks later, I brought it up during my interview with Tweedy, but I didn't explain that it wasn't my original idea (it didn't seem worth the trouble, particularly since I didn't think Tweedy would give a fuck who came up with a theory he doesn't even agree with). When I eventually turned this story in, Dolan was mildly nonplussed that I had hijacked his insights, which I can wholly understand (particularly since I prefaced the sentiment by saying, "*I think ...*"). As such, I cut it out of the original story. This sort of thing happens sometimes. For example, in 1997 my friend (and then coworker) Ross Raihala was interviewing Art Linkletter, and Linkletter became upset when Ross used the terms *hobo* and *bum* interchangeably (apparently, Linkletter had worked as a hobo in his twenties and found the word *bum* to be mildly offensive). Whenever I tell this anecdote to strangers (which happens quite often, for some reason), I sometimes imply that Linkletter told this to me directly, simply because it's too complicated to explain who Ross is and how I know the details of this dialogue. I concede this is lying, but it's lying for the sake of simplicity.

2. Benzodiazepine is the generic of Valium.

TAKING THE STREETS TO THE MUSIC

I blew this one. *The New York Times Magazine* sent me to London to do a profile on Mike Skinner, a young, white semi-rapper who performs under the name The Streets. He had just put out an album I loved, so I was pretty jacked about doing this. I'd also never been to London, so that seemed intriguing. Unfortunately, I choked during the interview.

Many reporters try to “save” questions for the end of interviews, because they don't want to make the subject upset. I rarely do this; I occasionally ask the toughest, most uncomfortable questions at the front end of an interview. The best interviews always involve a certain degree of creative tension. However, I should not have tried this with Skinner. Because his lyrics were so smart and sophisticated, I overlooked the fact that he was still a young guy who wasn't political or aggressive or interested in verbal sparring; he just wanted to hang out, talk about bullshit, and get this interview out of the way.

Still, I wrote the story and turned it in to the magazine. This initiated a new problem, because my editor and I suddenly recognized something about Mike Skinner that we both should have recognized before I ever left the U.S.: the Streets isn't famous here. For most people who read *The New York Times*, this would be the first time they'd ever heard of him. As such, it wasn't clear why we were even doing the story; it wasn't like American culture was on the precipice of being overrun by boyish British rappers. I rewrote the story completely, this time basing the narrative around a Streets show in a Brooklyn club that happened a few months after I had gone to England. This gave the article more context, but not much. The new draft was also more confusing, because almost everyone at the show in Brooklyn was white; it suddenly seemed like this story was about race (although in no specific way). A few months passed; I assumed my editor would just kill the story entirely. But then—almost a full year after the original interview—Skinner released a few random songs over the Internet, so the *Times* mag cut down the second draft of the story from 3,000 words to 1,200 words and ran it as a two-page “Perspectives” piece.¹

So ANYWAY, what follows is the original draft of the story that never ran, an artifact that has probably grown more dated and pedantic within the time it took you to read this introduction.

UNTITLED GEEZER PROFILE

(SPRING 2003-ISH)

It has been brought to my attention that geezers need excitement.

Supposedly, this reality is self-evident. And it seems that if these geezers do not find that excitement within the context of their own lives, they have a propensity to incite violence. This revelation is, apparently, common sense. Simple common sense. And I have no idea what any of this is supposed to mean, and I am waiting for Mike Skinner to explain it to me.

Providing that explanation is what he does for a living.

Walking among the unwashed, unhip masses of the world at large, Skinner is merely another kid from Britain, a twenty-four-year-old who looks like he just turned fifteen. Do not feel depressed if you've never heard of him, as he is not famous. Except that he is, if you happen to be the kind of person who actively searches for pop geniuses. In certain circles, in certain clubs, and pretty much anywhere in London, Skinner is one of those "voice of a generation" types: as the writer-rapper-producer for a one-man hip-hop entity known as The Streets, Skinner has experienced the kind of meteoric ascension (at least among critics) that changes a messenger into his own self-styled medium. His debut record, *Original Pirate Material*, has been dubbed the first transcendent hip-hop album to emerge from England ... which is kind of like being dubbed the sexiest female at a gnome convention. But Skinner's title might eventually mean more. At least for the moment, Skinner incarnates a British youth movement everyone else has ignored. His lyrics are defined by their lack of action: The Streets speaks of "The Geezer Lifestyle"—the mundane, day-to-day pursuits of antitrendy, blue-collar white males in England's lower-middle class. It's a lifestyle that Skinner depicts in almost all his songs (most notably on a track called "Geezers Need Excitement," the philosophy of which I paraphrased in the opening paragraph of this story).

However, the more I ask Skinner who and what a geezer truly is, the more I suspect that the motivation behind my question is more complex than the reality of his answer. In fact, that's the point, and that's what I don't understand.

"I guess *geezers* is just like if you were to say *man* or *dude* or something like that," he says with his left hand shoved halfway into his pants and his British accent leaning to the right like verbalized italics. "Like, I could have

just as easily said ‘*Dudes need excitement*,’ and it would mean pretty much the same thing.”

Really? That’s all there is to this? *Geezer* is just a word?

“Well, no. I guess not,” he responds. “I guess maybe there is a roughneck quality to *geezer*. But it mostly just means a guy I would consider cool. D’know what I mean?”

Well, no. Not quite. But maybe.

The narratives on *Original Pirate Material* are almost like little episodes of *East Enders*, filtered through the slang and sensibilities of *Trainspotting*. Skinner and his geezer posse drink beer and brandy and eat fish and chips, and they discuss bong technology and Carl Jung and a future that seems vaguely dystrophic. They appear to play a lot of video games.

Unlike American rappers, Skinner does not talk of *bitches* and *hos*; he chases *birds*. He tells his listeners that they should be happy if they don’t relate to his message, because that means they’ve never really been depressed. Yet the tangible content of *Original Pirate Material* is not nearly as compelling as the way it’s delivered; Skinner might be the most aggressively British Brit in pop history. Like Thatcher-era dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, Skinner’s vocal style is closer to conversation than rapping; his accent isn’t harsh, but it’s *vast*. It’s relentless. And it’s so staunchly Anglo that even the people who love him seem unwilling to classify his work as rap music. *Entertainment Weekly* proclaimed *Original Pirate Material* as the single finest album of 2002, but they call it “punk.” *The Village Voice* described it as “England’s first great hip-hop record, mostly because it’s not a hip-hop record.” *SPIN* argued that Skinner “doesn’t really rap,” while *Rolling Stone* enthusiastically insisted his record was all a “great rap goof.” The reasons behind these contradictory accounts are myriad, but the core explanation is that Skinner shares none of the clichés of conventional American hip-hop; he’s propulsive, but never bombastic. It’s more intellectual than urgent, and it represents a different kind of urbanism: even when Skinner speaks rapidly, he sounds completely and utterly bored.

“My life isn’t that interesting, really. I get up at nine, I work on music until around six or seven, maybe I watch the telly for a few hours, and then I go to bed. Sometimes I go out and get [drunk], but not all that often,” Skinner says. “Everyone has me down as this crazy, drinking, drug-taking,

working-class hero. And when I get drunk, I suppose I do get crazy. I suppose everybody does. But what I notice is that I can give a three-hour interview and mention doing drugs once, and that quote always shows up in the article. Sometimes I'll say something to a journalist, and I immediately know they're going to use it to create whoever they need me to be."

This is an interesting twist, because we had been discussing marijuana legalization just twenty minutes before he told me this; I'm pretty sure the memory of that exchange is why he said what he did. He knows what he's doing.

"My day is not as interesting as everyone wants to think," Skinner says again. "Okay, so I eat a bacon sandwich and push the knob on a computer for six hours, and then maybe I smoke weed or maybe I don't. That's sort of my job, if you can call it that. I am a workaholic. It's just that I really don't do anything."

At the moment, Skinner is sitting across from me in a 12 x 12 foot room that contains almost nothing: it has a table, two chairs, one pitcher of water, one drinking glass, and one tape recorder. There is an overhead light, but the bulb is dark; late-afternoon light pours through a window. This is the kind of room that would seem well suited for interrogating potential al Qaeda operatives, except that there's also a poster of the rock band Oasis against the far wall. We're in the back room of a south London management company called Coalition, and the twenty-four-year-old Skinner is looking at me like a six-month-old beagle puppy: huge brown eyes, big ears, paws that seem too big for his body, and a general sense of optimism. He's dressed like a suburban teenager who has put exhaustive effort into appearing as casual as possible—multiple layers of T-shirts and sweatshirts, a silver watch that's too big for his twig-thin wrists, low-slung pants, and a pair of cross-trainers that Nike awarded him for being cool in public. Around his neck he wears a razorblade, a potentially deadly accessory he somehow managed to buy from the Duty Free cart during an airplane flight to Japan. I gather that this is how geezers are supposed to dress, since Skinner has come to define the post-modern definition of what that's supposed to mean.

Those who keep insisting that The Streets isn't actually a rap act could use Skinner's interview posture as proof—he does not talk about the things one has come to expect from hip-hop practitioners. He hasn't been shot nine

times (like 50 Cent), nor does he casually mention murdering people (like Jay-Z). He never praises God or criticizes his biological parents; when he discusses the complexities of “The Game,” he’s usually referring to PlayStation 2. And while most rappers use media interviews to validate their “realness” or to self-mythologize their persona, Skinner does neither; he won’t even tell me in which part of London his apartment is located, beyond admitting that he arrived at our interview via the subway. He expresses a closeness to his immediate family but gives few details, only disclosing that his father used to repair and sell televisions and his mother worked at a hospital. When he tells me he has a girlfriend, he taps his temples and obliquely says, “And that’s good, because that keeps you focused.” His responses are closer to what you’d expect from a Ralph J. Gleason interview with Bob Dylan: Skinner says everything he creates is straightforward autobiography, and that he can’t describe his lyrics any better than how they already exist on the album. There is nothing on *Original Pirate Material* that is not intentional, nor is there any better way to express them.

“Everything I rap about is really just an example of me talking about myself. I mean, I could talk about the tape recorder sitting on this table, but I’d really just be talking about *my* perception of what it is. I’d be talking about myself,” he says. “I’ve never been interested in the idea of someone being able to get *anything* they want out of a song. My sister, she thinks that you should be able to find your own meanings of things in songs. She likes Radiohead. I’m not like that. All that, ‘I’m just a fish in the sea, I’m so lonely’—that’s kind of bollocks. There is nothing on my record that you can’t understand literally.”

Except, of course, the part about geezers needing excitement, lest they create violence. And everything else, really.

After ninety minutes in the interrogation room, I convince Skinner to go to a tavern across the street called the Barley Mow Pub. As we leave the Coalition office, we pass the desk of a publicist who has made dozens of photocopies of a *Rolling Stone* story about The Streets, headlined “England’s Eminem.” I suspect Skinner gets that a lot. We leave the building and look for an ATM, and I ask him what he thinks of the comparison (and if he’d seen Eminem’s semi-autobiographical film *8 Mile*).

“Oh, I suppose it’s because we’re both white and we both tell stories,” he says, only mildly interested in the question. “I’m not as angry as he is, although I don’t think he’s as angry as he is, either. I quite liked *8 Mile*, though. It was sort of like *The Karate Kid*, you know? Have you seen *The Karate Kid*? Very similar kind of thing.”

I mention that most Americans compared *8 Mile* to Prince’s semi-autobiographical film *Purple Rain*.

“Oh, was that album based on a movie? I had no idea. Good songs on that one, though.” He briefly impersonates Prince, somewhat less convincingly than when he sarcastically impersonated Thom Yorke while discussing his sister’s love of Radiohead.

In truth, the rational connection between Eminem and The Streets is almost nonexistent; if not for a shared lack of pigment, they’d never be mentioned in the same sentence. For one thing, The Streets operate in a genre of hip-hop categorized as “garage” (pronounced to rhyme with the word *marriage*, at least in the U.K.). Though the difference is subtle, the garage designation ostensibly means that most music on a Streets record only has two beats per measure; conventional rock, rap, and techno usually have four. But there’s also a philosophical difference between Marshall Mathers and Mike Skinner that makes the latter especially compelling; he’s arguably the first significant hip-hop artist to completely remove the element of race from his music. Eminem addresses his race tangibly (the second track on his last LP was titled “White America”). Seminal Caucasian rappers like the Beastie Boys always seemed hyperconscious of their whiteness; when their first album came out in 1986, just about everyone assumed the Beastie Boys were mocking black culture. Their racial iconography was always an issue. So when a record like *Original Pirate Material* includes no references whatsoever to race, it’s oddly jarring; it’s like listening to a Christian rock album and noticing they never mention Jesus.

When I ask Skinner about this, he perceives the answer to be self-evident: he says segregation does not exist in England. He mentions how he used to love listening to records by Compton gangstas like Snoop Doggy Dogg, but that Snoop seemed to live on an altogether different planet. Quite simply, being white is something Skinner never thinks about. “When I first got into this, all anyone ever talked about was being real,” he says. “I was actually terrified of making anything that wasn’t real, because that seemed

to be the whole thing. That's why I don't talk about race very much. It wouldn't be real for me."

Nelson George, the author of *Hip-Hop America*, is not surprised.

"It's all about context," Nelson says when I ask about the significance of Skinner's race-free worldview. "MCs in America are obsessed with race. In England, MCs are obsessed with class."

In the case of Skinner, that's true, although his obsession is built on the belief that the class system notion is ridiculously anachronistic. "The really posh people in England are the only ones who still care about class," he says. "Nobody our age thinks like that anymore. I mean, even people on the dole have TV. They still have the Internet. That's why the people who still worry about class have become less concerned with how much money someone has. Now, class is all about *breeding*, because that's all they have left to separate themselves."

Because so much of his material comes (or at least *appears* to come) from the perspective of a lower-middle-class ruffian, *The Streets* has been consistently portrayed as a representative of the working class. This is not really true; Skinner hates the working-class designation and insists his life has been relatively easy. He's been painted as a prototypical backstreet kid from Birmingham, the bleak industrial city that's musically best known for spawning Black Sabbath. This is also partially inaccurate; Skinner lived in Birmingham for several years, but he was born in London and returned there for good three years ago ("I never really picked up the Birmingham accent," he says). Still, his persona as a cultural intruder is not a complete fabrication. He is not working class because of poverty, but he's driven by working-class common sense.

"What I hate about London is that there are so many loafers claiming to be artists," he says at the pub. "I was raised on function. If you have a job in Birmingham, you're a waitress. You sell insurance. You build something people can use."

"A few years ago, I was working for a company here in London. I stuffed envelopes. Now, this company had been given something like fifty thousand quid during the Internet craze—but I could not figure out what they did. And I'm a pretty clever bloke. I guess they were technically selling bandwidth, but all they really did was put on nice shirts in order to convince people to repackage something that didn't exist in the first place. That—to me—sums up London."

This story is funny, but it's also important, or at least it is to me. It's important because that's pretty much how I felt when I moved to New York, and it's probably the reason certain American outsiders relate to *Original Pirate Material* with a depth that defies logic or geography. For reasons I could never fully fathom, the Geezer Culture Skinner so often describes in song always reminded me of Midwestern slacker culture from the early 1990s: it puts the same emphasis on thought over action. It feels the same resentment toward privilege. And it embraces the experience of the nonevent—Skinner is a genius at describing what it's like to do nothing. This is why he can tell personal stories that feel general, and it's why The Streets can resonate with listeners who don't even know what he's necessarily talking about. His stories don't matter; what matters is the way he tells them. The realities may be different, but all the details are the same.

"Look, you don't know my background. You've never been to where I'm from," Skinner says. "But there is something about the way I talk that makes you understand, right? So it doesn't matter what I do. If my next record is about flying in a private jet and drinking champagne² with my girlfriend Jennifer Lopez,³ and then Jennifer Lopez dumps me, you'll be able to understand that as much as you can understand when I talk about seeing some brunette bird at a pub or when I talk about watching Courtney Cox on the telly or anything else. D'know what I mean?"

Sort of. However, it still seems like there's something Skinner's not telling me. Even though we're in a pub, he refuses to drink, opting instead for orange juice. He says this is because he's just coming off antibiotics, but I don't believe him. We talk a little about video games (his current favorite is *Getaway*, the U.K. version of *Vice City*), and about what he likes and dislikes about the United States (he loves the fact that Americans value and reward success, but he thinks too many Americans exist in a "culture of intellectual laziness"). Nothing he tells me is outrageously illuminating. But just before he leaves to go do "something" (he wouldn't say what), we chat about why certain things happen and why certain people end up in certain situations. And then Skinner offhandedly mentions something that might show a glimpse of the impetuous, working-class Streets that represent the generation he's supposedly voicing. It's the culture of cerebral underthinking.

"See that tap over there on the bar?" Skinner says, pointing toward the pub's business end. "Let's say someone told me to remove it right now. I'd

most likely just take a screwdriver and take it apart immediately. I'd never unhook the hoses underneath or anything like that, and I'd probably piss beer all over myself. I'm a doer. I just do things."

I mention that this is a strange metaphor, and he agrees. But I'm not sure what he thinks he's agreeing with. Is he agreeing that it's strange to remove a beer tap without unhooking its hoses, or is he agreeing that it's strange to remove a public beer tap simply because somebody told him to do so?

"That's a good point," he says, and I suspect he might mean it, because he genuinely seems confused. "I don't know. I'm a thinker, I guess, but sometimes things just need to be done."

So I guess it's all true: sometimes, things just need to be done. There doesn't need to be a reason. Geezers don't need a reason. Geezers need excitement. Geezers need something else.

1. And I'm sure the details of this editing process are absolutely fascinating to you, aren't they?

2. Or becoming addicted to cocaine, at least if one were to consider the content of his third album, 2006's *The Hardest Way to Make an Easy Living*. In fact, I almost get the impression Skinner started abusing cocaine just so he would have something interesting to rap about.

3. Or some unnamed, crack-smoking teen superstar, as described in the song “When You Wasn’t Famous.” Skinner was a very forward-thinking geezer.

Q: You are placed in the unenviable position of having to compete for the right to stay alive.

You will be matched against a person of your own gender in a series of five events—an 800-meter run, a game of Scrabble, a three-round boxing match, a debate over the legalization of late-term abortion (scored and officiated by reputable collegiate judges), and the math portion of the SAT.

In order to survive, you must win at least three of these events (your opponent will be playing for his or her life as well). However, you (kind of) get to pick your opponent: you can either (a) compete against a person selected at random, or (b) you can compete against someone who is exactly like you. If selected at random, the individual could be of any age or skill level—he/she might be an infant with Down syndrome, but he/she might also be an Academic All-American line-backer from Notre Dame. If you pick “the average human,” he/she will be precisely your age and will have an identical level of education, and the person will be a perfect cross-section of your particular demo-graphic—he/she will be of average height and of average weight, with a standard IQ and the most normative life experience imaginable.

So whom do you select? Or—perhaps more accurately—do you feel that you are better than an average version of yourself?

CERTAIN ROCK BANDS YOU PROBABLY LIKE

If you are the kind of person who talks about music too much, there are two words that undoubtedly play an integral role in your day-to-day lexicon: *overrated* and *underrated*. This is because those two sentiments constitute 90 percent of all musical discussions; people are constantly discussing who they think is overrated and who they think is underrated.

What’s interesting about this phenomenon is the way no one seems to use the same criteria for either of those terms. For example, a band can be classified as overrated because they sell more records than a certain logic might dictate (Creed, 311, Bad Company), or they can be overrated because certain rock critics seem to like them too much (Sonic Youth, Wilco, Yo La Tengo). Artists can be underrated if they sell a lot of records but aren’t widely regarded as brilliant (Thin Lizzy, Duran Duran), or they can be underrated because almost no one in the world seems to know who they are

(Tortoise, Sloan, Lifter Puller). Bands can be overrated if they're canonized as indisputably great when they're only very good (U2, Madonna, the Eagles), and artists can be underrated if everyone thinks they're terrible when they're actually okay (Limp Bizkit, No Doubt, and—once again—Creed). Bands can be overrated because they're good-looking (the Lemonheads in 1993), or they can be underrated because they're good-looking (the Lemonheads in 1994). Some groups can be overrated and underrated at the same time (Radiohead). Some groups seem overrated on purpose (Oasis). Some groups seem eternally underrated because—no matter how hard they try—they're just not as interesting as groups who are overrated on purpose (Blur). It is very easy to be underrated, because all you need to do is nothing. Everyone wants to be underrated. It's harder to become overrated, because that means someone has to think you were awesome before they thought you sucked. Nobody wants to be overrated, except for people who like to live in big houses.

But I am not interested in overrated and underrated bands.

That argument is too easy, and all it means is that somebody else was wrong. I'm far more interested in "rated" bands. I'm obsessed with bands who are rated as accurately as possible—in other words, nobody thinks they're better than they actually are, and nobody thinks they're worse.

They have the acceptable level of popularity, they have attained the correct amount of critical acclaim, and no one is confused about their cultural significance. They are, in essence ...

THE TEN MOST ACCURATELY RATED ARTISTS IN ROCK HISTORY!

10. The Black Crowes: Their first album sold five million copies, which is precisely the right number. Stoned people like this band, drunk people think they're okay, and sober people disregard the overwhelming majority of their catalogue. This all makes perfect sense. By all possible standards, the Black Crowes are rated accurately.

9. Madness: This is one of only two ska bands admired by people who hate ska (the other being the Specials, who are overrated). Nobody disputes this admiration. "Our House" was a pretty great single, but it's nobody's *favorite* song; nobody seems to dispute that assertion, either.

8. Triumph: Always associated with Rush and/or the nation of Canada, but not as good as either.

7. Tone-Lōc: Hardly anyone takes Tone-Lōc seriously, except for frivolous pop historians who like to credit him for making suburban white kids listen to rap music that was made by black people (as opposed to the Beastie Boys, who made white suburban kids listen to rap music that was made by nonsuburban white kids). This lukewarm historical significance strikes me as sensible. Neither of Mr. Lōc's hits are timeless, although "Wild Thing" samples Van Halen's "Jamie's Cryin'" (which I like to imagine is about *M*A*S*H* star Jamie Farr, had Corporal Klinger pursued sexual-reassignment surgery in an attempt to get a Section 8) and "Funky Cold Medina" samples "Christine Sixteen" (at a time when KISS was making records like *Hot in the Shade* and nobody in America thought they were cool except for me and Rivers Cuomo). Those two songs were actually cowritten with Young MC, whose single "Bust a Move" is confusing for the following reason: The last verse of "Bust a Move" states, "Your best friend Harry / Has a brother Larry / In five days from now he's gonna marry / He's hopin' you can make it there if you can / Cuz in the ceremony you'll be the best man." Now, why would anybody possibly be the best man in a wedding where the groom is your best friend's *brother*? Why isn't your best friend the best man in this ceremony? And who asks someone to be their best man a scant five days before they get married? And while I realize the incongruities of "Bust a Move" have absolutely nothing to do with Tone-Lōc, it somehow seems more central to Tone-Lōc's iconography than his role in the movie *Posse*, which was arguably the best movie about black cowboys I saw during the grunge era.

6. My Bloody Valentine: On the surface, it would seem like My Bloody Valentine should be underrated, but they're not; everyone who cares about pop-o-centric guitar music considers *Loveless* to be a modern classic, and everyone who is wont to mention "swirling guitars" during casual conversation inevitably references that specific album. *Loveless* sold something like two hundred thousand copies. This is the correct amount of people on earth who should care about the concept of swirling guitars; any number higher or lower than two hundred thousand would be ridiculous.

5. Matthew Sweet: Everyone knows that every Matthew Sweet album has only one good song, and that this good song is inevitably the first single, and that this single is always utterly perfect (“Sick of Myself” off *100% Fun*, “Where You Get Love” off *Blue Sky on Mars*, “Girlfriend” off *Girlfriend*, etc.). He sells enough albums to live comfortably, and that seems reasonable.

4. The Beatles: The Beatles are generally seen as the single most important rock band of all time, allegedly because they wrote all the best songs. Since both of these suppositions are true, the Beatles are rated properly by everyone.

3. Blue Öyster Cult: The BÖC song everyone pays attention to is the suicide anthem “Don’t Fear the Reaper.” This song is haunting, but not in a good way; it makes me nostalgic for hating the Moody Blues. However, the BÖC song virtually no one pays attention to is the pro-monster plod-a-thon “Godzilla,” and that track is monster-crushingly beautiful. So—in final analysis—Blue Öyster Cult is accurately rated *by accident*. This occurs on occasion; the same phenomenon happened to Scottie Pippen.

2. The New Radicals: There are only five facts publicly known about this musical entity. The first is that 1999’s “You Get What You Give” was an almost flawless Todd Rundgren-like masterwork that makes any right-thinking American want to run through a Wal-Mart semi-naked. The second is that nobody can remember the singer’s name. The third fact is that the singer often wore a profoundly idiotic hat. The fourth fact is that if this anonymous, poorly hatted singer had made a follow-up album, it would have somehow made his first record seem worse. And the fifth fact is that his album didn’t quite deserve to go gold. Accurately rated in totality.

1. Van Halen: This band should have been the biggest arena act of the early 1980s, and they were. They had the greatest guitar player of the 1980s, and everyone (except possibly Yngwie Malmsteen) seems to agree on this point. They switched singers and became semi-crappy (except for the middle four songs on *5150* and the booze classic “Cabo Wabo”), and nobody aggressively disputes that reality. They also recorded the most average song in rock history: “And the Cradle Will Rock.” What this means is that any song better than “And the Cradle Will Rock” is good, and any song worse

than “And the Cradle Will Rock” is bad. If we were to rank every rock song (in sequential order) from best to worst, “And the Cradle Will Rock” would be right in the fucking middle.

And that is exactly what I want.

—*SPIN*, 2005

The Passion of the Garth

1 Half the energy I've spent writing (and reading) about music over the past fifteen years has been preoccupied with the same problem: "Is this thing I'm writing about *real*?" It wasn't something that always needed to be addressed directly, but it was always there. Is this artist genuine? Do his songs speak to an actual experience? Is the persona of this music's creator the same as who the creator is? What is the fidelity of these recorded sounds? Were the guitars actually synthesizers? Were the synthesizers actually guitars? What is the ultimate motive of the musician, and does that motive match the aspirations of his audience? These issues have formed the spinal cord of what music journalism inevitably is—the search for authenticity and the debate over how much authenticity matters. And certain conclusions finally seem apparent:

1. Nothing is completely authentic. Even the guys who kill themselves are partially acting.
2. Music that skews inauthentic is almost always more popular in the present tense. Music that skews toward authenticity has more potential to be popular over time, but also has a greater likelihood of being unheard completely.
3. In general, the best balance seems to come from artists who are (kind of) fake as people, but who make music that's (mostly) real. This would be people like Bob Dylan. The worst music comes from the opposite situation, such as songs by TV on the Radio that aren't about wolves. If the singer is fake *and* the music is fake (Scott Weiland, Madonna, Bing Crosby), everything works out okay.
4. Normal people don't see any of this as a particularly pressing problem. They do not care. A few critics do, but that's about it.
5. The most telling moment for any celebrity is when he or she attempts to be inauthentic *on purpose*, and particularly when that attempt fails.

Like most Americans, I've lost interest in the first three conclusions. The fourth conclusion isn't interesting either, although the overwhelming truth of that sentiment makes it worth remembering. But the fifth point remains compelling. It speaks to the core confusion most humans have about who they truly are, and it illustrates why fame does not seem to make most famous people happy. When an artist successfully becomes somebody else, the result is defining and eternal: It's David Bowie morphing into Ziggy Stardust and becoming greater than either himself or the character. But when such a transformation fails, the original artist disappears into something else. He disappears into himself, and everybody gets sad and uncomfortable and inexplicably obsessed with all those authenticity issues they never cared about before.

This is what happened with Chris Gaines.

2 Rock writer Rob Sheffield once drunkenly argued that the supernatural success of nondescript country artist Garth Brooks was a social reaction to the temporary absence of Bruce Springsteen. This is the type of argument so simultaneously obvious and unseen that only someone as supernaturally brilliant as Rob Sheffield could possibly make it. There's a lot of evidence to support his theory: Springsteen essentially disappeared from America from 1988 to 1999. He even moved from New Jersey to L.A., casually claiming that building a new house in Jersey would be like Santa Claus building a new home at the North Pole. For roughly a decade, Springsteen stopped being Springsteen; he released a couple introspective albums, but he was not the man Americans knew. Garth filled that void by selling over a hundred million records. He created the Era of Garth. Brooks didn't always write his own material, but he made songs that satisfied all the same needs that Bruce's did, except with a little less sincerity and a better understanding of who his audience was. "Friends in Low Places" was as effective as pop music ever gets: It's a depressing song that makes you feel better. Singing along with that song was like drunkenly laughing at a rich person and knowing you were right. "Friends in Low Places" addressed class in the style of Pulp's "Common People," was as emotionally obtuse as Nazareth's "Hair of the Dog" and as pragmatic and mystical as BÖC's "(Don't Fear) The Reaper."¹ It's a song that makes me want to get drunk out of *spite*. Garth told stories about blue-collar people who felt good about what their

bad life symbolized, which is the same reason *Born to Run* will never seem unimportant. Now, are the songs on *No Fences* as good as the material on *Nebraska*? No. But Garth understood an entire population of Americans he would never meet. I don't know if Garth Brooks could necessarily relate to the masses who loved his music, but they could relate to him. They fucking knew who he fucking was, because he made them feel like themselves.

And I think he felt weird about being able to do this.

And that's not unusual. And that's why certain things happened.

2A I don't have a lucid memory of what the world was like in 1999; it seems more distant to me than 1989, for whatever reason. I do know music was still selling like crazy, though: Total album sales in '99 were 940 million. What was playing on the radio still mattered, and most of it was mainstream alternative rock or Santana's *Supernatural*. There was a certain kind of semi-heavy, quasi-spiritual, midtempo track that could be three years old but still get endless airplay—Creed's "My Own Prison" was omnipresent at the bars and malls and Applebee's I was frequenting at the time. The most popular single in the world was "Livin' la Vida Loca," a song about how Pro Tools made Puerto Ricans gay. There were a lot of bands who selected random numerical names on purpose (Matchbox 20, Third Eye Blind, Seven Mary Three), and there were a lot of people trying to convince themselves that a double album by Nine Inch Nails wasn't ridiculous. Two disposable teens killed a bunch of beautiful people in suburban Colorado for reasons completely unrelated to Marilyn Manson, but traffic at Hot Topic improved nonetheless. Meanwhile, I was storing potable water and Oreo cookies in my hall closet; I was obsessed with Y2K, which negatively impacted my interest in things like TLC. At the time, TLC was advising me not to hang around with scrubs. This was kind of like their advice from 1994 about not chasing waterfalls. I never got that. Why not chase waterfalls? They're so easy to chase. It would have been far more sensible if deceased arsonist Lisa Left Eye had told me not to chase something dangerous, like wildebeests. "Don't go chasing wildebeests." It was that kind of millennium. People cared about shit, but not really.

It was into this hazy malaise that Chris Gaines emerged, widely noticed but generally unattacked (this being the pre-blog age). The big reveal/marketing initiative happened on *Saturday Night Live*, a program that's always fun to read about but almost never fun to watch: Brooks

hosted the November 13 show with alter-ego Gaines as the musical guest, as if they were two different, unrelated people. The fact that I was even watching this program clearly suggests (a) the SEC football game on ESPN must have been a blowout and (b) I had a drug problem. There was also a fake VH1 *Behind the Music* about Chris Gaines, although I never caught that; I think it might have aired during the Iron Bowl. But *anyway*, all initial logic suggested that this was just an unorthodox way to promote *The Lamb*, the fictionalized biopic of Gaines's "life" that was supposed to hit theaters in early 2000 but never actually came into existence. At the time, most people made the same assumption as me. But Garth had his own unique perspective: His concern over the transformation dwelled almost exclusively on its consumer viability.

"So the big question is this," Brooks said at the time. "If we don't have the traditional first week, that 'Garth Brooks week' that we've been so fortunate to have [in the past]—is [the new album] going to be deemed a failure? I'm hoping that Chris gets a chance, like all new artists, gets to come out and then hopefully word of mouth gets around and he starts to pick up and gain speed, and starts to actually live and breathe like artists do."

On the surface, this statement does not seem strange; it sounds like the normal kind of bullshit major recording stars offer up when they have to give twenty interviews in two days. But it *is* strange, and not just because Garth is talking about a different person and himself at the same time. It's strange because Brooks is obsessed with the one thing that he did not need to reinvent himself to achieve—mainstream commercial success. His motive for becoming a different person was to become the person he already was, minus the hat.

Even more than the album itself, the liner notes to *In the Life of Chris Gaines* (the fake Chris Gaines anthology) indicate a specificity of confusion that's too abnormal to be insignificant. The opening pages of the CD booklet show a photo of Gaines standing in an industrial kitchen, clad in black; its facing page is a biography of our nonexistent musician, presumably explaining what would have become the narrative thread for *The Lamb* (had it ever been produced). The biographical details² are explicit, charming, and stupid in the manner one might expect. But more curious is the emphasis Brooks placed on chronicling the chart success of Gaines's career: He notes that Gaines's first imaginary solo album spent "an

extraordinary 224 weeks” in the Billboard Top 200 before winning a Grammy. His second imaginary album, the sexually “dark and angry” *Fornucopia*, debuted at number one and spent eighteen weeks at the top of the charts. His imaginary 1994 album *Apostle* spent eight imaginary weeks at number one “without any artist promotion.” It’s almost as if Brooks was honestly dreaming of a world where he did not exist, so he felt obligated to create a musician whose career would fill the commercial void left by the disappearances of *No Fences* and *Ropin’ the Wind*.

In his imagination, Garth knocked himself out of the Billboard charts with himself.

2B *In the Life of Chris Gaines* ended up selling two million copies in two months, a relative failure in the musical economy of 1999.³ It got as high as number two on the Billboard charts, but it never had a “Garth Brooks week,” just as its creator feared. And while *feared* might be too strong a verb, it’s not far off: Garth Brooks really, really cared about record sales. I can’t think of any artist who ever cared about sales more. Which is not to say Brooks was obsessed with *money*, because that’s totally different—the Rolling Stones care deeply about money, but they don’t give a shit how it’s acquired. If Kiss could make more money farming than playing in a band, Gene Simmons would immediately sign an endorsement contract with John Deere. Jimmy Page is probably counting his money *right now*, as you read this very sentence. The desire for wealth complicates artistic vocation, but it doesn’t tell us much about the music. What Garth cared about more were statistics. Like a nongambling Pete Rose, Brooks was consumed by the magnitude of his own numbers: With career album sales over 128 million, he is currently the bestselling solo artist of all time. This was not happenstance: At Brooks’s request, some outlets slashed the retail price of his late nineties albums to guarantee massive opening-week sales. “I believe in the Wal-Mart school of business,” Brooks has said. “The less people pay, the more they enjoy it.” After he released a double live album in 1997, Capitol Records put out a press release chronicling his dominance in random U.S. cities: A Media Play in Rockford, Illinois, sold three hundred albums when the album went on sale at midnight. Tower Records in Sacramento sold four hundred copies in two hours. A Sam Goody in California sold out of the CD in two hours. Some outlet called Gallery of Sound in Edwardsville, Pennsylvania, sold a thousand copies on opening

day. Brooks has received twenty-four Billboard Music Awards, an honor based solely on quantifiable unit moving. All his concerts sell out (in 2007, he played nine straight “comeback” shows in Kansas City’s Sprint Center, selling 23,750 tickets on every single night). No other nineties artist comes close to his dominance. For ten years, Brooks was twice as popular as U2 and REM *combined*.

This is interesting for lots of reasons, but particularly for one: Since his semi-retirement in 2000, Brooks has inexplicably evaporated from the public consciousness. His highest-profile moment was covering Don McLean’s “American Pie” at an inaugural ball for president-elect Obama in 2009. Modern country radio rarely plays his music, and he isn’t yet viewed as part of the “classic country” contingent. None of his songs have become standards. I spent a weekend in Nashville and went to half the honky-tonks on Broad Street, and I didn’t hear his music once. He already seems half as famous as Brad Paisley.

So why did this happen? How does someone this beloved not become a legend once he’s absent? It wasn’t like Brooks was a Lou Reed–level jerk, or even a Clint Black–level jerk. He was always magnanimous and respectful toward his principal influences (George Strait and George Jones) and once played five sold-out shows in L.A. for charity. Yet the minute he stepped out of the room, nobody cared. And I think the reason this happened is the same reason Brooks tried to become Gaines in ’99: His persona was somehow real and fake at the same time. It was real in the sense that it was not contrived or imaginative—he was just the same normal guy he always was. It was fake in the sense that it was unnaturally straightforward—it’s impossible for a normal person to sell 128 million albums, or even to *want* to sell 128 million albums. And Brooks seemed to understand that. There was eventually a three-pronged disconnect between (a) who Garth thought he was, (b) who the audience thought Garth was, and (c) how Garth assumed his audience *wanted* to think of him. So he tried to connect those dots through Chris Gaines, and he failed. But that aborted reinvention tells us more about Brooks than anything else he’s ever done. It exposes the confusing truths that had always been there, lurking unnoticed.

3 In the late 1960s, when three (or at least two) of the four Beatles had started to lose interest in being “the Beatles,” Paul McCartney gave an interview where he mentioned how it would be fun to re-form the Beatles

under a different name and to wear masks on tour, thereby allowing the band to perform without the responsibility of being who they were. Supposedly, McCartney was shocked and disappointed when the journalist informed him that everyone would immediately figure out who they were the moment they started singing. The first time I read this story was in the introduction to *The Bachman Books*, a collection of four Stephen King novels written under the pseudonym Richard Bachman. King's intro is titled "Why I Was Bachman."

Because King directly mentions McCartney in his essay, one assumes he must have related to Paul's desire, which would explain why he wrote books with a fake name. But this is not accurate. McCartney—seemingly unaware of how distinctive his preexisting identity was—wanted to play music without hassle and cultural meaning. He wanted an artistic life with less pressure, where the only thing that mattered was his own experience. King—keenly aware of how his preexisting persona was impacting his work's perception—wanted to see if his success was based on authentic skill or established celebrity (at one point in "Why I Was Bachman," he begrudgingly notes that the book *Thinner* sold 28,000 copies when published under the Bachman moniker but 280,000 when rereleased as a King title). He wanted an artistic life with *more* pressure, where the only thing that mattered was how audiences consumed the literal content.

Now, I'm certain Brooks did not make *In the Life of Chris Gaines* because he thought it would be easier; he probably did more promotion for this album than any other.⁴ But is it possible that Gaines was his version of Bachman? The transformation wasn't masked and anonymous, but it provided an opportunity to test the actual parameters of his enormity. He was easily the biggest artist in the country-western idiom, but critics (of course) still questioned his realness; if he were able to sell eight million albums in the more judgmental, less forgiving world of rock, all those prior criticisms would be moot. Realness would no longer matter—the sound of his voice would transcend everything. If he could sell records as Chris Gaines, it would mean he could sell records as anybody. It would prove he was great (or at least that he had established a certain kind of greatness). But this is the problem with finding oneself through the numerical calculation of one's commercial achievement: It only makes sense the first time it happens. After that, it keeps perpetuating itself, over and over and over again. It starts to seem like it isn't based on anything. So maybe the

only way to make it feel real is to do something that *doesn't* succeed, just to demonstrate that the work itself actually played a role in whatever made you good in the first place.

2C In 2008, hyper-Christian DirecTV advocate Beyoncé Knowles released *I Am . . . Sasha Fierce*. This record is principally remembered for the song “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It),” arguably the first song overtly marketed toward urban bachelorette parties. The original hook of the album, however, was the concept of Knowles becoming “Sasha Fierce,” a character *Entertainment Weekly* described as her “sensual, aggressive alter-ego.” During an appearance on *Oprah*, Beyoncé described Sasha Fierce in the same way; in fact, I believe she used the same exact words. The whole time she spoke with Winfrey, Beyoncé appeared to be working off a script, once misspeaking in a manner that made it obvious she’d rehearsed the entire conversation. I don’t know who came up with the Sasha Fierce concept, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t God. Beyoncé claims Ms. Fierce was invented during the making of “Crazy in Love” in 2003, but the whole thing seemed so unnatural and out of character that the only explanation can be strategy. Somewhere along the line, somebody important came to the conclusion that there is a segment of Knowles’s audience who likes to imagine that Beyoncé’s secret personality is erotic and confrontational and street. Someone concluded that making this personality into a product would expand the brand (and maybe it did). But as an artistic creation, Sasha Fierce did not work. It only excites those who desperately want to be fooled. When Sasha covered Alanis Morissette’s “You Oughta Know” in concert, it was far more entertaining than provocative. It did not make her personality more complex; mostly, it reminded people that Beyoncé doesn’t really have any personality at all. She loves Christ, she loves her husband, she sings reasonably well, and she’s beautiful. That’s the whole package. Becoming a different person only served to make that all the more obvious, because it seemed like she was trying to *guess* what a cool person might act like.

It was the same for Garth. His self-portrait of Chris Gaines—a sullen, post-*Nevermind* alt rocker who aspired to compete against bands like Cake and Marcy Playground—resembles an attempt at sarcasm by the FBI’s witness protection program. His decision to grow a soul patch pretty much said it all: In the ten-thousand-year history of facial hair, no one has ever

looked nonidiotic with a soul patch. In fact, the zenith of the soul patch's legacy was Matt Dillon in *Singles*; Dillon grew a soul patch specifically *because* he was portraying an alt rock d-bag. Gaines's hair is likewise confused; it's styled in that severe, midlength manner all the hair metal dudes adopted after grunge convinced them to record their version of *Superunknown*. He's dressed completely in black from the neck down, except when he wears a black-and-white leotard. But still. He does not look like a rock 'n' roll machine. He looks like somebody who should be trying to assassinate Castro for Gerald Ford. And unlike Sasha Fierce, I suspect the look for Chris Gaines was totally Garth's vision—an amalgamation of all the signifiers of modern rock, tied together by his desire to be liked by both (a) the kind of person who typically disliked him and (b) the kind of person who would like him no matter what he did. As it turns out, there were exactly two million consumers in that second category. But it was the jerks in that first category who mattered more, and they knew he was guessing all along. This, oddly, is the one musical situation where authenticity *does* matter: If you want to adopt an unnatural persona, that persona needs to be an extension of the person you secretly feel like. You have to be “authentically pretending.” You have to be the only person who could have become the character you embody. This is why Ziggy Stardust never seemed like a Halloween costume. It's also why Chris Gaines felt like marketing, even if that hadn't been the intention. He was crazy, but he wasn't *singularly* crazy. He wasn't crazy enough.

4 What will always remain unclear, of course, is what would have happened if Chris Gaines had made a song that people legitimately loved. *In the Life of Chris Gaines* technically gave Brooks the biggest pop single of his career (“Lost in You,” which was evidently supposed to sound a little like an upbeat incarnation of Tracy Chapman's “Fast Car”), but virtually no one remembers that this track even exists. Brooks wrote none of the material on *In the Life of Chris Gaines*; the majority of it was penned by two ex-members of the Christian rock group White Heat. It was produced by Don Was, a Grammy award winner who's best known for being the white dude with dreadlocks who produced the worst Stones albums of all time, walked the dinosaur, and generally talks like he's full of shit. Several of the songs were tied to the nonexistent movie *The Lamb*: “Maybe” was pegged as a tribute to Gaines's fictional dead friend Tommy, supposedly a

huge Fab Four fan (the melody falls somewhere between late-era Beatles and lazy-era Oasis, and one of the lyrics is “Even though the bird has flown”). What’s disappointing about *In the Life of Chris Gaines* is that it’s supposed to be a creative overview of Gaines’s entire fake life, but the songs all sound like they come from the same period (the “earliest” track, something called “My Love Tells Me So,” does not resemble anything that could have been popular in 1985, even in a Coke commercial). The goal of every song on *In the Life of Chris Gaines* was to become the male equivalent of Sheryl Crowe’s “All I Wanna Do”—an accessible single that nobody would necessarily love but that most people would offhandedly like (and that could thereby inhabit AOR stations and drive album sales for ten to eighteen months). What he wanted was a quiet smash, and he did not get it.

But let’s assume that he did.

Let’s pretend some song off *In the Life of Chris Gaines* resonated with rock audiences the way “The Thunder Rolls” had resonated with country listeners. Let’s say his new success mirrored his old success. Let’s say he guessed right. What would have happened? It’s a difficult reality to imagine, especially since Brooks no longer talks about this period of his career. When cross-dressing gutter punk David Johansen turned himself into Buster Poindexter and became a hundred times more famous than he was as a member of the “important” New York Dolls, the initial assumption was that the new alter ego was the person he actually wanted to be. As it turns out, the only part Johansen liked was the money (he would eventually tell National Public Radio that the 1987 song “Hot Hot Hot” had become the bane of his existence). But I think Garth would have felt differently. I don’t think he would have ever completely returned to himself. If large numbers of consumers had wanted a new Chris Gaines record every two or three years, he would have kept making them; if they had adored Gaines more than Garth, he would not have felt sad. He might have preferred it—it would have made more sense to him. Authenticity was never really the catalyst here, for him or anyone else. Despite all the weirdness and craven promotion, *In the Life of Chris Gaines* was not an indulgent vanity project. It was the opposite. A vanity project is something you do for yourself. *In the Life of Chris Gaines* was done exclusively for other people, which is why no one noticed.

ABBA 1, World 0

1 Sometimes it's hard to tell if things that happened in your life only happened to you or if they happened to everyone. Every formative incident feels normal to the child who experiences it, so sometimes it takes twenty-five or thirty years to realize a particular event was singularly bizarre. For example, it took me a long time to recognize that being institutionally taught to dislike disco in my second-grade social studies class was deeply weird—unless, of course, this was a totally normal thing that happened to *everybody* in America who was born in 1972 and attended a public elementary school. I still can't tell.

Once or twice a month (and usually on a Friday), my social studies class would not read from our textbooks. Instead, we were given a publication called the *Weekly Reader*, which was like a newspaper for four-foot illiterates. It concisely covered the entire spectrum of current events, most notably the eruption of Mount St. Helens, the ongoing success of NASA, and whatever was supposedly happening in women's sports and national politics. For some reason, one of the exposés tackled by the *Weekly Reader* in autumn of 1980 was the rising unpopularity of disco, punctuated by "Disco Demolition Night" at Chicago's Comiskey Park during the summer of '79 (news cycles were slower in those days). Disco Demolition Night was a promotional event where a bunch of intoxicated baseball fans blew up Village People albums with dynamite in center field. Things, as they say, did not go smoothly. Thirty-nine people were arrested in the subsequent riot, which actually seems like an amazingly low number considering the stupidity of the original idea. There was an allusion to this in the *Weekly Reader* (or at least in the fake *Weekly Reader* I've created in my memory), and it went on to explain how disco was this insidious, unserious social force. This story was evidently written to convince me and all my eight-year-old friends to continue playing kickball instead of frequenting discothèques. Along with the article was a photograph of four people with comical pants and uncommitted expressions. They were described as "The

Disco Group ABBA”: They were beards and teeth and natural breasts and whiteness. I suppose my feelings about them would be best described as “mixed,” inasmuch as I wasn’t sure if they made me bored or hungry for cookies. Part of me still wonders if this actually happened. Maybe it took place during that academic year I was involved with the Dharma Initiative.

But now—obviously—I am older. I have my own beard and my own comical pants, and I am sitting at a computer listening to “The Winner Takes It All” for the two hundredth or three hundredth or seven hundredth time, and I find myself continually shocked by how profoundly *adult* this song is. The chords are sonically limitless. The lyrics refer to judicial proceedings and express uncomfortably specific details about the end of love: I can think of no other pop song that examines the self-aware guilt one feels when talking to a person who has humanely obliterated your heart.

*I don't wanna talk
If it makes you feel sad
And I understand
You've come to shake my hand
I apologize
If it makes you feel bad
Seeing me so tense
No self-confidence*

The message of “The Winner Takes It All” is straightforward: It argues that the concept of relationships ending on mutual terms is an emotional fallacy. One person is inevitably okay and the other is inevitably devastated. There is a loser who metaphorically stays and a winner who literally leaves, and the individual leaving takes everything with them. Like virtually all of ABBA’s music, “The Winner Takes It All” was written by the two male members of the group, Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson. The vocals were sung by Agnetha Faltskog (she was the blond one), who divorced Ulvaeus in 1979 after moving out of their home on Christmas night in ’78. “The Winner Takes It All” was released as a single in 1980. Ulvaeus has claimed that the song is not an autobiographical depiction of his failed marriage to Faltskog, but that’s hard to believe when one considers the original title of the song was “The Story of My Life.”

When thinking about ABBA, this is the song to think about.

2 “When the eighties were over,” Scandinavian ABBA historian Carl Magnus Palm wrote in 2001, “it was clear that none of the former ABBA members had any relevance whatsoever in the international pop landscape.” This statement isn’t false, but it’s wrong. I suppose it’s true if you use the word *relevance* like most people who regularly write about music, but it’s false if you think about how the world actually operates. As a rule, people who classify art as “irrelevant” are trying to position themselves above the entity; it’s a way of pretending they’re more in step with contemporary culture than the artist himself, which is mostly a way of saying they can’t find a tangible reason for disliking what something intends to embody. Moreover, the whole argument is self-defeating: If you classify something as “irrelevant,” you’re (obviously) using it as a unit of comparison against whatever *is* “relevant,” so it (obviously) *does* have meaning and merit. Truly irrelevant art wouldn’t even be part of the conversation.

Since at least 1979, AC/DC has been allegedly irrelevant. When the Knack and Nick Lowe were hot, Angus Young seemed oversexed and stupid. AC/DC was irrelevant in 1984 because they lacked the visual impact of less-heavy metal acts like Dokken, and they were irrelevant in 1989 because they weren’t releasing power ballads about teen suicide. They were irrelevant in 1991 because of grunge. They were irrelevant in 1997 because they weren’t involved with the mainstreaming of alternative culture. They were irrelevant in 2001 because they weren’t implementing elements of hip-hop into their metal. When they played Madison Square Garden in 2008, the always likeable *New York Times* critic Jon Caramanica opened his review like this: “All the recent talk of how AC/DC is due for critical reappraisal? Ignore it.” As far as I can tell, AC/DC has been irrelevant for the vast majority of their career. And this has played to their advantage. Judging the value of any band against the ephemeral tastes of the hyper-present tense always misinterprets its actual significance. Moreover, any act lauded as “especially relevant” (and any critic¹ preoccupied with hunting whomever that’s supposed to be) is almost guaranteed to have a limited career, simply because so much of their alleged value is tied to an ephemeral modernity they only embody by chance. The reason AC/DC will leave a larger, deeper footprint than virtually all of their competition is because they’ve never been relevant *or* irrelevant; they make music outside of those parameters. This quality is rare. It’s also a hard truth for creative personalities to accept. There’s a scene in the 2004 Metallica documentary

Some Kind of Monster where guitarist Kirk Hammett is upset over the band's unwillingness to let him play a conventional rock guitar solo on their new record. Hammett argues, "Can I say something that I think is bullshit? This whole fucking [notion that including a guitar solo] dates the whole thing? That's so bullshit. Because if we *don't* play a guitar solo in one of these songs, that dates it *to this period*. And that cements it to a trend that's happening in music right now." When this exchange occurs during the film, everyone in the audience giggles. It seems like Nigel Tufnel logic. But Hammett intuitively understood something the other guys in Metallica didn't want to accept: The mere recognition of an extrinsic reality damages the intrinsic merits of one's own reality. In other words, it's a mistake to (consciously) do what everyone else is doing, just as it's a mistake to (consciously) do the opposite.

According to the aforementioned C. Magnus Palm, the members of ABBA were irrelevant at the end of the eighties, presumably because they were (a) not creating singles that were on the pop charts, or (b) not overtly influencing the work of people who were (like Madonna and Paula Abdul). That's one way to look at it. But a better way is to view ABBA in 1989 like AC/DC in '99—they were neither germane nor extraneous. They were not attempting to replicate or refute anything else that was happening in pop; they were living in ABBA World, where ABBA Music is the only sound that exists.

3 It's difficult to say anything new or insightful about ABBA, mostly because they've already absorbed every possible criticism and accolade that a musical act can entertain. They first became famous after winning the televised Eurovision Song Contest, which is sort of an Old World precursor to *American Idol*; it took them three tries, but they finally won in '74. Across Europe, that TV appearance raised their profile but immediately shackled them with a credibility deficit that was solely a product of the medium (thirty years later, Adam Lambert would relate). Still, the group had a natural narrative and a romantic appeal (two strange men writing songs for their beautiful girlfriends to sing), and all the songs were immediately accessible and ridiculously well crafted. Initial U.S. reviews were almost entirely positive—the *Los Angeles Times* called their debut "compelling and fascinating." By 1975, ABBA was the most popular band in the Western world, eventually having at least one number one single in

fifteen different countries. And this, somewhat predictably, was roughly the same time dismissing ABBA became the only acceptable stance for anyone serious about culture. The core complaint (from the most predictable sources) was that ABBA records sounded like collections of commercial jingles. In retrospect, this criticism is as misdirected as it is uninspired: By erroneously tying “Waterloo” to advertising, it somehow implied that ABBA were capitalist stooges who wanted to sell something beyond the music itself (in truth, it was the TV commercials who wanted to affect people as easily as ABBA, not the other way around). Much like the Carpenters, ABBA became representative of a musical aesthetic so distant from the edge of rock that clever people weren’t even willing to expend energy hating them. The Sex Pistols openly despised Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd, but they punished ABBA by paradoxically stealing their material—after hearing ABBA’s “S.O.S.” on the radio, Pistols bassist Glen Matlock copied the riff for the song titled (not coincidentally) “Pretty Vacant.” As is so often the case in mainstream pop, the fact that ABBA made simple songs that were not political or antiestablishment positioned them as vapid. ABBA’s dissolution in 1983 was scarcely noticed by the American media (not even the *Weekly Reader* cared), and any reasonable person could have concluded that their legacy was already carved into Swedish limestone. But (of course) it wasn’t. The core audience for ABBA did not waiver throughout the next decade; the popularity of their most memorable singles (particularly “Dancing Queen”) expanded despite minor FM radio exposure. When the compilation *Gold* came out in 1993, every college girl who dressed goofy played it whenever she pretended to be drunk. In 1994, Janeane Garofalo’s character in *Reality Bites* needed ABBA to define her quirk, while *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* needed ABBA to invent gay Australians. The first artist listed in the 1995 *Spin Alternative Record Guide* was the traditionally unalternative ABBA; that same year, MTV’s Kurt Loder gave an interview to *Playboy* and mentioned he “missed ABBA a lot.” By the end of the twentieth century, it was far more contrarian to hate ABBA than to love them.

Now, who was “right” among these factions (the original ABBA supporters, their antagonistic detractors, or the modern revisionists) is not important to me. I have no interest in convincing anyone they need to download *Voulez-Vous* posthaste, because I am post-taste. But what is compelling is how this polarizing trajectory occurred. The pattern is

certainly not unique to ABBA; it's not unusual to see artists who are (a) initially appreciated before (b) falling out of favor, and then (c) returning to prominence after the fact. But it's more pronounced here: The highs were crazier and the lows were grosser. What makes this arc even more noteworthy is that the group itself did not seem actively involved with any of these machinations (the members will retrospectively talk about how they were perceived by the media and by fans, but they scarcely seem to care). They appear uninvolved with the rest of the world; throughout the 1990s, Faltskog did not even own a home stereo. And this natural disconnect is the central reason ABBA has succeeded over time—and it's something I noticed through other people before I realized it on my own.

My first clue, I think, was hearing people talk about *Muriel's Wedding* in 1994. I don't think I saw *Muriel's Wedding* until 1997. It did not seem like a movie I would enjoy.² But whenever I heard people talking about how great it was, they inevitably used a very specific phrase when describing the soundtrack: "It's all ABBA music." They did not say, "All the music is by ABBA," or "It's nothing but ABBA songs." They would always say, "It's all ABBA music." And what I came to realize is that these moviegoers were unknowingly making a critical distinction that explains why this group is so resilient and timeless. They weren't just saying, "It's all ABBA music." They were saying, "It's all ABBA Music." The *M* requires capitalization. And this is because—more than any other group of the post-Beatles era—ABBA is a genre unto itself. It's a brand of music that's sometimes recognizable in different songs and sometimes glimpsed through other artists, and everyone naturally grasps the qualities that come with it; you sometimes hear elements of it in department stores or druggy foreign films or New Age religious services. But only ABBA could make ABBA Music *in totality*. They are the only group who completely understands what they do, including the things they do wrong. So if that is what you like, there is only one place to really get it. The rest of culture does not matter. The Grateful Dead were kind of like this as well, but not as singularly as ABBA; while it's easy to think of artists who deliver a comparable sonic experience to the Dead, the closest equivalent to ABBA Music—probably the Bee Gees—doesn't come close at all.

The harder question, of course, is "What qualities does ABBA Music possess?" Its musical traits have been outlined ad nauseam elsewhere: Their records feature a wall of sound where overdubbing makes every detail

bigger and brighter than it should be. The hooks are mammoth and the lyrics are unspecific. The songs are made for dancing in a very big room. Now, these traits can be found elsewhere (they're just as present in ABBA replicants like Ace of Base, albeit recorded less artfully due to advances in technology). What makes ABBA different is time and geography; operating out of Stockholm in the seventies, they were (a) singing in a second language, and (b) living with real ideological distance from the trend-conscious worlds of New York and L.A. and London. They had an intense Tin Pan Alley professionalism (if Björn and Benny felt like writing an uptempo T. Rex song, they'd just sit down and knock off "Watch Out" in three hours), but they were also laissez-faire Scandinavian hippies who didn't have to worry about crime or sexual mores or health care. It was impossible to tell if they were progressives or reactionaries.³ ABBA wanted to reach audiences in America, but they lacked a framework for what that entailed. Their best option was to make one up. They tried to create a simulacrum for how the American pop ethos appeared to objective Swedish outsiders. This is where we get the weirdness of ABBA: the *Star Trek* outfits, the histrionic onstage super-vamping, and the curious decision to consistently make Swedish women sing English narratives with Spanish⁴ themes. What ABBA built was a previously nonexistent pop universe: It was a serious attempt to embody U.S. culture, attempted by European citizens who weren't remotely interested in being American. Consequently, it was always a little off. Sometimes it was too much. But it was *successful*. And *everyone* knew it. And that success became part of the sound. The fact that every human on earth (including their most vehement detractors) was keenly aware of ABBA's magnitude changed how the songs came across. It validated the obtuseness and bewildered the inflexible. "ABBA was so mainstream," Barry Walters would eventually write in *The Village Voice*, "you had to be slightly on the outside to actually take them to heart." ABBA had figured something out about America that we could effortlessly hear but only partially comprehend. This was the supernatural element of ABBA Music—flawless, shiny, otherworldly songs that evoke both mild confusion and instantaneous acceptance.

It was never, and therefore always, relevant.

4 There's no reason for me to tell you to listen to more ABBA. There are lots of other people more qualified (and perhaps more motivated) to do that

than me: salt-and-pepper soccer moms, the members of Erasure, people who watch *Mamma Mia!* on JetBlue flights, dudes who shop at Crate and Barrel, Vladimir Putin,⁵ etc. I don't think ABBA is a band you can really change anyone's opinion about, anyway. It's kind of like trying to convince someone that Coca-Cola is delicious—if they don't agree with you immediately, they probably never will.

That said, I also can't think of any other band who needs my public support less. This, I suppose, is my essential point: ABBA succeeds because the rest of the world isn't necessary. They operate within their own actuality. In 2002, ABBA was offered \$1 billion to reunite. That's a *billion*, with a *B*. That's \$250 million apiece. If someone reads this book in the year 2110, that will still be a lot of money. But they turned it down. "We had to think about it," Björn told *The Guardian*, "because one could build hospitals with that much money . . . [But] we don't want to go through the stress of disappointing people evening after evening." This is crazy for lots of reasons. The first is that I'm sure the main explanation as to why this didn't happen was because Agnetha (the blond one) did not want to do it (she now lives as a semi-recluse and never enjoyed fame, even while she was pursuing it). The second reason is that it would be funny to wake up from a skiing accident in a hospital named after ABBA. The third is that I cannot imagine ABBA fans being disappointed by even the lamest of cash-grabbing reunions (ABBA fans are not exactly authenticity hard-liners). The fourth is that—regardless of how awesome or unawesome these concerts might have been—any tour where a band is promised \$1 billion would be doomed to financial failure (the total revenue from *every single North American concert* in the year 2002 was only \$1.8 billion). The fifth is that ABBA is probably the biggest group I can think of that *nobody* ever talks about seeing live. (When is the last time you heard some old codger reminisce about how mind-blowing it was to hear "Hey Hey Helen" back at the Cow Palace?) I could go on and on with this list. But why? The reunion didn't happen, and it won't happen. Unlike just about every other act from their era, ABBA doesn't need the money or want the attention (or *want* the money and *need* the attention). They don't have to worry about the future of their music, because other people will make sure it never disappears. It doesn't matter if the critical consensus surrounding their import changes, because no one who likes ABBA Music cares if it's supposed to be good or bad. They'll never have to reunite and pretend to be in love. They'll never

have to convince anyone of anything. They'll never have to leave Sweden. They'll never have to read this essay (or any essay like it); in ABBA World, this kind of discussion doesn't even subsist. They are so much themselves that they're beyond the rest of us. ABBA won, and the winner takes it all.

T Is for True

1 *Put me in a special school
'Cause I am such a fool
And I don't need a single book to teach me how to read
Who needs stupid books?
They are for petty crooks
And I will learn by studying the lessons in my dreams*

—Weezer, “Troublemaker”

2 Every morning upon waking, I always feel something of a deficit. “Again! Why have I not dreamt?” This may be one of the reasons I make films. Maybe I want to create images for the screen that are so obviously absent from my head at night . . . I have never set out to imbue my films with literary or philosophical references . . . Film is not the art of scholars but illiterates. You could even argue that I am illiterate.

—Werner Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog*

3 Every time I see something terrible, I see it at age 19.

—Ralph Nader, speaking to *Esquire* at the age of forty-nine

4 Irony, as we all know by now, is not interesting. We have all talked about irony for twenty years, and now we're done talking about it. But *lying* is still interesting. And these two things remain connected, even though they feel so utterly different. An ironist is someone who says something untrue with unclear sincerity; the degree to which that statement is funny is based

on how many people realize it's false. If everybody knows the person is lying, nobody cares. If nobody knows the person is lying, the speaker is a lunatic. The ideal ratio is 65–35: If a slight majority of the audience cannot tell that the intention is comedic, the substantial minority who do understand will feel better about themselves. It's an exclusionary kind of humor. It's also the dominant humor of this era and (arguably) the only kind of humor interesting young people are still able to understand. It's become so central to modern communication that anything smart Americans enjoy is described (or misdescribed) as *ironical*. Either the product is being consumed ecstatically and with detachment (such as *American Idol* or Lil Wayne's nonmusical pursuits), or it's supposedly serving as a wry commentary on the straight, mainstream world—sometimes intentionally (Jason Bateman, Beck, *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*) and sometimes accidentally (*Sex and the City*, *Us Weekly*, Susan Boyle). To varying degrees, almost every new cultural invention is built on (a) an overt suggestion of partial dishonesty or (b) the universal inference that the artist *must* be lying, even if he or she insists otherwise. This is why we become so disoriented whenever someone tells the truth in a forthright manner; it always seems ridiculous, precisely because it is not.

1A People are generally disappointed by Weezer albums. It's become the band's defining ethos—they consistently disappoint the people who love them most. It's an insular version of disappointment that makes no immediate sense: Weezer distresses the exact same people with every record they release. This should be impossible. If *every* new record a certain band makes disappoints its base, one would assume chagrined consumers would eventually give up. But people have a different kind of relationship with Weezer, and it's due to the songwriting of front man Rivers Cuomo: He writes completely straightforward lyrics, presented through music devoid of irony. He *exclusively* presents literal depictions of how he views the world, and he (almost exclusively) plays guitar riffs that he'd personally want to hear as a fan. There are no other major elements to his work. The tone of his guitar is an attempt to replicate the tone of guitarists he appreciated as a teenager, particularly Ace Frehley and Carlos Cavazo. He employs metaphors, but the metaphors are hyperobvious stand-ins for his own confessionals; he tosses around stilted hip-hop language that makes it seem like he's mocking all the affluent white kids obsessed with superficial

blackness, but he used to be one of those kids. His lyrical fantasies (such as living life as a professional surfer) are faithful, expository descriptions of what he fantasizes about. In 1994, he wrote an unreleased rock opera called *Songs from the Black Hole* that involved six separate characters (one of which was a robot), but he later admitted the entire narrative was really about his own experience on tour. Artistically and motivationally, Weezer makes completely unaffected music—more authentic than Black Flag or Bright Eyes or Janis Ian. But because every other aspect of Cuomo’s public life seems constructed and self-aware—and because he displays all the usual qualities we’ve come to associate with kitsch and irony—audiences are unwilling to view Weezer’s music as a reflection of Cuomo’s autobiography. They think it must be about something else; they think it must have something to do *with them*, and with *their* experiences, and with *what they want* from pop music. They are disappointed that Weezer’s post-*Pinkerton* music doesn’t sound honest; it often strikes them as lazy or self-indulgent or unfinished. But the reason it sounds that way is because it’s *only* honest. It’s so personal and specific that other people cannot relate to it. And—somehow—that’s assumed to be Cuomo’s job. For some reason, he’s supposed to make music that his fans can connect with and live through. But he can’t do that (or won’t do that) on purpose. He can only do that by accident, and only intermittently. As a musician, he does not lie for the benefit of other people, and that keeps his fans terminally disappointed.

In 2006 I delivered a lecture at Boston University, and a person in the audience wanted to know what I thought of the Weezer album *Make Believe*. This man, for whatever reason, was extremely upset about it. “Is Rivers trying to fuck with us?” he asked. “That album contains three of the worst songs ever recorded.” I mentioned there were at least three songs on the album I liked: “Beverly Hills,” “We Are All on Drugs,” and “Freak Me Out.” The man in the audience immediately lost his mind. “Those are the three songs I was referring to!” he exclaimed. “They’re terrible. It’s almost feels like he’s trying to make fun of me for buying his music.”

This is a strangely common sentiment; since returning from a self-imposed musical exile in 2001, there has often been a sense that Cuomo is mocking the kind of utterly earnest person who loves Weezer the most. Weezer’s relationship to the emo movement is central to this problem: They’re not an “emo band” in any sonic respect, yet they’re the most important group the genre has ever produced. Weezer defines what emo

music is supposed to do—if Sunny Day Real Estate’s “Seven” is the emo “Rock Around the Clock,” then Weezer’s 1996 sophomore effort *Pinkerton* is the emo *Sgt. Pepper*. The concept of a confessional male songwriter directly emoting to the audience about his own paralyzing insecurities is perfectly realized on *Pinkerton*, and that makes it the defining document of the idiom. But here’s the twist—traditionally, emo musicians draft a metaphorical contract with their fan base. The message is this: “I am telling you exactly how I feel, even if that feeling is problematic and embarrassing and temporary, because we are ultimately the same people. We have all the same feelings, even if some of those feelings aren’t real.” For hard-core Weezer fans, that experience happened when they listened to *Pinkerton*. What they failed to realize was that the connection was accidental. Cuomo did not write those words to connect with other people. He did not make a conscious attempt to help confused teenagers understand themselves. It just worked out that way. But the assumption was that Cuomo had constructed this level of empathy and that this construction *must* have been, to a certain degree, unreal. It had to have been—at least partially—a career move. No realistic human ever expects absolute authenticity from any musician; that expectation would feel naïve, and it contradicts everything we know about how art is presented in the postmodern world. So when someone actually does this—when someone doesn’t fabricate feeling for the sake of artistic purpose—we misread the motive. Rivers Cuomo is such a solipsistic writer that his fans cannot accept that he’s giving them *exactly* what they claim to want. Whenever he examines the process of being alive, he really isn’t thinking about anyone except himself. He is beyond emo, and he’s not lying about anything.

This is what the question asker in Boston did not understand: He could not fathom that a person he believed to be working for him had never considered his needs at all. When he listened to a song about the desire to possess a swimming pool in Beverly Hills, it seemed to be the opposite of what he identified as his own desires. He thought it must be cheap sarcasm. When he listened to the song “We Are All on Drugs,” it seemed like Cuomo was making a joke that did not have a punch line. In truth, there isn’t even a joke. “We Are All on Drugs” is intended to be taken literally, except for the specific use of the word *drugs*. That was the only abstract aspect of the entire track.¹ “Freak Me Out” struck him as the single stupidest moment on the album, particularly since the band had started claiming in interviews

that the lyrics were about Rivers being frightened by a spider. To the question asker, this explanation made sense; *of course* it had to have an inherently facile meaning. Except that it clearly does not. Go on the Internet and read the lyrics—they are amazingly self-evident. It's not about a spider. It's a song about Cuomo walking down the street at night, only to have some random bozo jump in his face and say, "Hey! You're the guy from Weezer! Your band kicks ass! But your albums disappoint me! Can I take your picture with my cell phone?" The song is called "Freak Me Out" because it's about being freaked out (and then feeling guilty about your own reaction). The question asker from Boston hated "Freak Me Out" because it did not seem to match any feeling he'd ever had. This is because the inquisitor has absolutely nothing in common with the protagonist who wrote the song. He is not like Rivers Cuomo; he is more like the weirdo in the shadow.

2A German film director Werner Herzog sometimes talks about truth being "elastic," a modifier that should indicate his definition of honesty does not have much to do with being literal. His persona is built around fictionalized mythologies: He's perceived as an egomaniac who supposedly pointed a loaded rifle at an actor in order to make him perform. While making the 1976 Bavarian glass-blowing epic *Heart of Glass*, Herzog hypnotized members of the cast to make them seem zombie-like on-screen. His singular cinematic achievement is 1982's *Fitzcarraldo*, a movie where hundreds of Peruvian natives drag a 320-ton boat up the side of a mountain, entirely shot without the use of special effects. The dragging of the boat is a fictionalized version of a semi-historical event; in the late nineteenth century, a Peruvian rubber baron pulled a smaller steamship over a South American mountain, but even that craft was disassembled before it was moved. In other words, Herzog faked the reality of the event, but he did not fake the event itself: What happens in *Fitzcarraldo* is actually more unbelievable than the story it's based upon. What was fabricated for the sake of the film was considerably more difficult than the factual achievement. To quote Herzog: "Facts create norms, but they do not create illumination." He once said he would only touch truth "with a pair of pliers." This sounds like a metaphor, but maybe it isn't.

So what does this mean? For one, it tells us that Germans are bizarre. But it also shows how truth is easier to accept when it's stridently unclear. We

can watch *Fitzcarraldo* and see its legitimacy precisely because Herzog is bending all sorts of lies for that final purpose. The situation is fake and the motives are fake, but the boat and the gravity are real. This makes us comfortable. It's the way we're now accustomed to consuming honesty in any film—tangential details are manipulated for the benefit of one Big Truth, which we are supposed to unspool upon retrospection (and also from the cognitive, preexisting understanding that this is a real fucking mountain and a real fucking boat, as no one who's ever watched *Fitzcarraldo* was not aware of those facts before seeing it—very often, they're the *only* things people know about this movie). In other words, this seemingly fanatical episode from *Fitzcarraldo* is among the most normal things Herzog has ever done as a filmmaker. He has constructed truth through standard (albeit complicated) cinematic means. But this is less interesting than when Herzog delivers truth without construction. That happens less often, but when it does, it's way crazier. This is a man who once consumed his own leather shoe, simply because he promised Errol Morris that this is something he would do.² Sometimes Herzog is literal in a manner so straightforward that almost no one pays attention.

There's a moment like this in *Grizzly Man*, Herzog's fascinating 2005 documentary about bear fanatic (and eventual bear entrée) Timothy Treadwell. Mostly assembled from Treadwell's own video footage, *Grizzly Man* is the story of an idiot (Treadwell) who—upon being rejected for the role of “Woody” on *Cheers*—decided to spend the next thirteen years of his life living with Alaskan grizzly bears, videotaping his experiences for a series of nature films. Treadwell views the bears as human peers and talks to them like children, constantly overstepping the (seemingly obvious) boundary between goofball human and 1,200-pound killing machine. Eventually, Treadwell and his girlfriend are killed and eaten by a bear. But along the way, Herzog quietly (and fairly) dissects the psychology of Treadwell; he spends a stretch of the documentary showing how Treadwell would often reshoot scenes of himself in order to control his own perception. He also points out how Treadwell fundamentally lied about a core aspect of his public persona—his girlfriend would sometimes accompany him on these trips into bear country, but Treadwell always insisted (directly into the camera) that he was alone. In many ways, *Grizzly Man* is about the very idea of truth. But that shifts when we get to a scene where Timothy discovers that a male grizzly has killed a few innocent bear

cubs in order to have sex with their mother. Treadwell is shattered by this event and decries how the world is confusing and painful. But then the camera cuts directly to the face of a bear and the image freezes. And as we look into the frozen, empty eyes of a bear, Herzog's voice-over says this:

Here, I differ with Treadwell. He seemed to ignore the fact that in nature there are predators. I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony but chaos, hostility, and murder.

Because this pronouncement is so dramatic (and—quite frankly—because Herzog's voice and accent are so goddamn funny), it always makes viewers laugh. It's impossible to watch the scene without laughing, especially since you're staring into the face of a motionless bear who seems to be emoting those same sentiments through mind bullets. It's not a moment most people remember from the film. Yet could there be a more unambiguous thesis for how Herzog views existence? There is no irony here. It is, in many ways, the core of his entire creative career. I can't rephrase his sentences with any greater clarity than what already exists on the page. *But this is funny to people.* It makes us laugh, because it's disturbing to take literal thoughts literally.

"I am someone who takes everything very literally," Herzog has said.³ "I simply do not understand irony, a defect I have had since I was able to think independently." That defect, however, is more an issue for his audiences than it is for the director himself. Most of us have the opposite defect: We *only* understand irony, even when it is not there to be understood.

3A "I can spend all day listing the mistakes the Democrats made both before and during Florida, but I don't care." This is political writer Eric Alterman, speaking into the camera in the documentary *An Unreasonable Man*, analyzing the 2000 presidential election. "[Ralph] Nader professed to be standing for one thing when in fact he was deliberately causing another thing. The Democrats were just incompetent. Nader was dishonest . . . To me, he's a very deluded man. He's a psychologically troubled man."

The reason Alterman hates Ralph Nader is obvious and well documented: He feels that by running for the office of president and getting 2.7 percent of the vote, Nader cost the 2000 election for Al Gore and subjected the United States to the most reactionary presidential administration in recent

history. Many Americans feel this way; had 10 percent of the 97,421 people who voted for Nader in Florida supported Gore by default, everything about this country would be (in some way) different. There is no mathematical way around this. Alterman's essential point is true—in practice, Nader's decision to run for the presidency was bad for America. But his perception of Nader as a person is completely wrong. To people like Alterman, Nader seems delusional and troubled and dishonest. But this is because people who follow politics closely cannot comprehend people who aren't partially lying. They are intellectually paralyzed by literal messages.

While running against Hillary Clinton in the race for the 2008 Democratic nomination, eventual U.S. president Barack Obama came under fire for his long-standing spiritual relationship with the Chicago Reverend Jeremiah Wright, a preacher who claimed the U.S. government created AIDS in order to destroy the black race. Wright had been the officiant at Obama's marriage and baptized Obama's children; when first pressed on the issue, Obama said he could no more disown Wright than he could disown his own grandmother.⁴ But the reverend refused to shut up; he kept making crazier and crazier statements. A few weeks later, Obama disowned him completely. This was seen as a totally rational, wholly acceptable move. I would have done the same thing. When Obama compared Wright to his grandmother, no one had really believed him; when he cut Wright loose, only the most partisan Republicans labeled him a hypocrite. What he did was normal, understandable, and nonliteral: It's what makes Obama a reasonable man and a (potentially) good president. We immediately recognize that his literal comparison of Wright to his grandmother is different than his actual feelings. Yet this is precisely the kind of unwritten dichotomy Ralph Nader would never accept. Nader might be the most stridently literal man who has ever gained traction in the modern political arena. Werner Herzog says he cannot understand irony, but at least he can create it for other people; Nader is a perpetual sincerity machine. His critics insist that he's a megalomaniac, and that's almost certainly true—but it's *sincere* megalomania. His arrogance is not misplaced. He lives in an inflexible world of complete moral certitude. He authentically believes that all of his values are 100 percent correct. Granted, this is an oddly common perspective within partisan politics; it's always shocking how much blind confidence people absorb from party propaganda. But the difference is in how people present that certitude. When Obama⁵ or Sarah Palin or Rachel

Maddow or Glenn Beck speak, we take for granted that—at the very least—they are partially (and consciously) lying. They are asking us to view their sentiments through preexisting filters we have all inherited through media; we take the verbatim sentences, consider the person’s larger motive, search for code and subtext in the specific words and phrases, and triangulate the true meaning. But Nader doesn’t work like this. Nader speaks literally, and that makes him superfluous.⁶ He delivers accusations in an unpackaged, unbendable manner: “The auto industry is killing people. Power has to be insecure to be responsive. Game six of the 2002 NBA Western Conference Finals was illegitimate.” That type of talk is antithetical to the thinking of all political animals. This is why Eric Alterman hates Nader so much, even though they fundamentally agree on many, many points. Alterman cannot fathom that the motives a man gives for running for the presidency could be identical to whatever his true motives are. Nader’s reasons for running in 2000 (and in 2004) were unvarnished extensions of what he claimed to represent. He was not psychologically troubled. He was literal, which is received by the public as the same thing.

2B *Cinema verité* literally translates as “cinema of truth.” Herzog, of course, hates cinema verité, claiming it’s “devoid of *vérité*.” In 1999, he wrote a ten-point manifesto titled “The Minnesota Declaration,” probably the only document in film history that attacks cinema verité techniques while complimenting Jesse Ventura. His essential point was that cinema verité provides “the accountant’s truth” and that cinema verité auteurs are like tourists. Keeping this in mind, I think it would be very interesting to see a Herzog movie about an accountant on vacation.

Any film consumer recognizes cinema verité the moment they see it, even if they’re unfamiliar with the term: It’s the kind of naturalistic, shaky, provocative camera work that feels like orchestrated news footage. You often see it employed in exceptional rock documentaries (*Don’t Look Back*, *Gimme Shelter*), but also in fictional narratives dependent on the aura of reality—*Cloverfield*, *The Blair Witch Project*, the opening combat scenes from *Saving Private Ryan*, most of the mumblecore movement, the 1971 dissident project *Punishment Park*, and both the U.S. and UK versions of *The Office*.⁷ Whenever we watch cinema verité movies, we unconsciously think of them as more lifelike than conventional film, simply because they’re made to look cheaper and more amateur than they are. This is why

Herzog hates cinema verité: It's more realistic, but it's not remotely literal. It's the least-literal filmmaking there is.

I am a huge fan of the NBC program *Friday Night Lights*, despite the fact that I don't like what it does to me. I don't like the way it manipulates my emotions. Here is a show about a high school football team in Texas, packaged as a melodramatic soap opera. While certain aspects of the program are legitimately well done by any standard (most notably the relationship between the head coach and his wife), much of the action involves implausible characters doing unbelievable things (showing up to football practice drunk; accidentally murdering people; winning or losing every game on the final play of the fourth quarter, etc.). But even when the on-screen action is ridiculous, it always has a *physical* impact on me—the combination of the music and the imagery consistently makes me feel like I'm on the verge of tears. *Friday Night Lights* can make my stomach hurt, even when my mind says, "This is silly." So I wonder: How much of this reaction is simply a product of the show's relentless use of cinema verité style, fused with my own self-imposed confusion over what truth is actually supposed to look like?

I suspect almost all of it.

Maniacal Slovenian monster-brain Slavoj Žižek once made a perverse, semi-relevant point about the movie *Titanic*; he argued that people are so out of touch with their true feelings that they mentally construct fantasies they don't even want, simply to feel like they have control over their unknowable desires. "How is the catastrophe [depicted in *Titanic*] connected to the couple, the rich upper-class girl and the poor lower-class boy?" Žižek asked. "After making love, they go up on the deck and embrace again and then she tells him, 'I will stay with you and abandon my people.' At that moment the iceberg hits the ship. What's the point? I claim the true catastrophe would have been for them to stay together, because it wouldn't work and they would split. It's in order to save that impossible dream that the ship must sink."⁸ Žižek is essentially arguing that because we cannot understand what we want from ourselves and from other people, we construct fictional placeholders that help us feel secure within our emotional confusion. We assemble and embrace false feelings in order to feel normal. In the same way, our inability to comprehend literal messages prompts us to pick arbitrary versions of media that become stand-ins for truth.

The cinema verité on *Friday Night Lights* only works because I know what it is (and because I have pre-accepted what it signifies). I know its self-reflexive flaws are supposed to indicate that what I'm seeing is closer to reality, so I automatically make that jump with my consciousness. In other words, this entire style of filmmaking only exists to remind me that what I am watching is supposed to be life. And I'm used to this; I am used to things that are constructed solely to make me feel like I am experiencing something natural. State parks and zoos are like this. The personality of Michael Moore is like this. The small talk made between strangers, the noises people make during intercourse, and compliments given to small children are all like this. I don't know if I could enjoy a genuinely literal TV show about high school football, or if I could spend my life with a wholly literal person.

4A There are many aspects about Ralph Nader that intrigue me, but none more than this: As far as anyone can tell, he's never had a single romantic relationship in his entire life. None. No ex-wife, no former girlfriends, no secret gay lover, no hookers, no one-night stands with savvy nineteen-year-olds who are hot to take down the Federal Trade Commission. You cannot even find a photograph of Nader that someone might misconstrue. There's just nothing there. And people have certainly tried to find this information. In fact, people have tried to *make this* happen: When he was fighting the auto industry in the 1960s, it's rumored that General Motors hired women to accost Nader in grocery stores and attempt to seduce him, all in the hope of discrediting his single-minded efforts to ensure that new cars didn't explode on impact. With the possible exception of Morrissey, I cannot think of a higher-profile figure so adamant about appearing asexual.

This makes sense.

It makes sense that Nader could not function inside a romantic relationship, as those are always nonliteral relationships. All romantic relationships are founded on the shared premise of love, a concept defined differently by all people. Conversations between couples are theatrical and symbolic; the first thing anyone realizes the moment they enter a serious relationship is that words (especially during fights) never represent their precise definitions. Nader would be paralyzed by the content of wedding vows—he would want to qualify everything. “In sickness and in health” would become “In sickness, with the possible exclusion of self-contained

vegetative states, and in health, assuming neither party has become superhuman or immortal.” It would be a deeply wonkified ceremony, probably held in rural Oregon.

Rivers Cuomo is not asexual, but he has had a lot of relationship problems (or at least he used to). I assume those problems were manifestations of his literalism. Love songs from Weezer usually paint Cuomo as a self-deprecating doofus, and they feel commercially smart because the main character seems like an idealized reflection of the bespectacled hipster nerds who buy his albums. But if the Weezer consumer ends up being a reflection of Cuomo, it’s purely an accident—he’s usually just explaining himself in very specific ways. He does (or at least did) look like Buddy Holly. He did, at one point, grow tired of having sex with people. His interest in Asian girls is not affected—those are the women who consistently arouse him. In the song “Across the Sea,” Cuomo explains how he received a letter from a female fan in Japan⁹ and became obsessed with the paradox of being loved by someone who was completely absent from his life (at the time, he was depressed and attending Harvard). He sings, “I’ve got your letter, you’ve got my song.” He’s having a one-to-one communication with this woman in a public setting, which is why everyone thinks he’s so emo. But it’s more than that. Cuomo is ignoring the basic principle we all assume is part of the creative process; he is not “creating” anything. If someone wants to analyze the nonsonic elements of “Across the Sea,” they are not performing music criticism; they’re psychologically profiling Cuomo in a totally clear-cut fashion. The only thing that can be deconstructed is the person himself.¹⁰ This is why Weezer songs are not taken seriously, or at least not as seriously as they deserve to be. People don’t want to think about singers as humans; they want to think of them as entities who create songs *for* humans. Moreover, they want to decide how sincere the creator is supposed to be—and the only way to do that is to start with the premise that the message is not the message. It cannot be literal. If it’s literal, the process is already over.

5 “And make no mistake: irony tyrannizes us,” wrote David Foster Wallace in 1993, long before this kind of problem had occurred to someone like me. “The reason why our pervasive cultural irony is at once so powerful and so unsatisfying is that an ironist is impossible to pin down. All U.S. irony is based on an implicit, *I don’t really mean what I’m saying*. So what does

irony as a cultural norm mean to say? That it's impossible to mean what you say? That maybe it's too bad it's impossible, but wake up and smell the coffee already? Most likely, I think, today's irony ends up saying: *How totally banal of you to ask what I really mean.*"

When I began writing this essay, Wallace was still alive. And because he was still alive (and because I wanted to write about the absence of literal messages instead of the proliferation of ironic ones, and because I knew I could never compete with the intellectual intensity of his work), it was my original intention to not mention him at all. But then he killed himself. In the wake of his suicide, it seems wrong to neglect referencing his views on what people mean when they say anything in public. Yet I suspect that the (very real) problem Wallace saw in '93 has evolved into something else entirely. It's not that we all collectively agree that asking someone what they really mean is banal; it's that we now assume that the real meaning of every statement is hidden by default. We assume that *all* statements must be mild inversions of the truth, because it's too weird to imagine people who aren't casually lying, pretty much all the time.

Every time I publish a book, I get asked if what I wrote is actually how I feel. If I write a review about *Chinese Democracy*, people will ask if I really like Axl Rose as much as I claim and if I'm being honest in the way that I describe liking his music. The same thing happens when I write about *Saved by the Bell* or ex-girlfriends in Minnesota or fictional characters with no ties to reality. The subject matter is irrelevant. My response to these questions is never the same. Sometimes I say, "Yes." Sometimes I say, "Sometimes." Occasionally I argue that the things I write are "thought experiments," or that I am only concerned with the technical practice of writing (with little care for the content), or that I am *only* interested in forwarding my ideas (and artistically unattached to the manner in which they are presented). Now, all of these answers are partially true. But the deeper reality is that I'm *not* sure if what I do is real. I usually believe that I'm certain about how I feel, but that seems naïve. How do we know how we feel? I'm likely much closer to Žižek's aforementioned description of *Titanic*: There is almost certainly a constructed schism between (a) how I feel, and (b) how I *think* I feel. There's probably a third level, too—how I *want* to think I feel. Very often, I don't know what I think about something until I start writing about it.

However, I do know this (or at least I think I do): When I am in the active, physical process of writing, I am writing literally.

It is always a literal, present-tense depiction of what is cognitively happening in my mind. Now, once a given sentence exists, that might change. Sometimes it changes just four seconds after I type it. But I still believe that sentence should be read in the literal context of its creation. I often wonder if we would all be better off if we looked at all idioms of art in a completely literal fashion, all the time. It would be confusing as hell for the first twenty or so years, but I suspect the world would eventually make more sense than it does now. At least we could agree on whatever it is we're pretending to understand.

I am no longer afraid to believe what I read, so I will go first.

About Chuck Klosterman



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Other websites:

- Chuck Klosterman Wikipedia Page
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuck_Klosterman)

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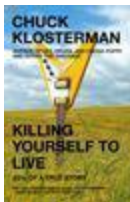
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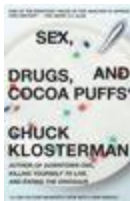
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A 6,557-mile roadtrip meditation on rock 'n' roll, death, girlfriends, and nostalgia for the recent past.



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A collection of essays, ostensibly about art, entertainment, infotainment, sports, politics, and kittens, but—really—it's about us. All of us.

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